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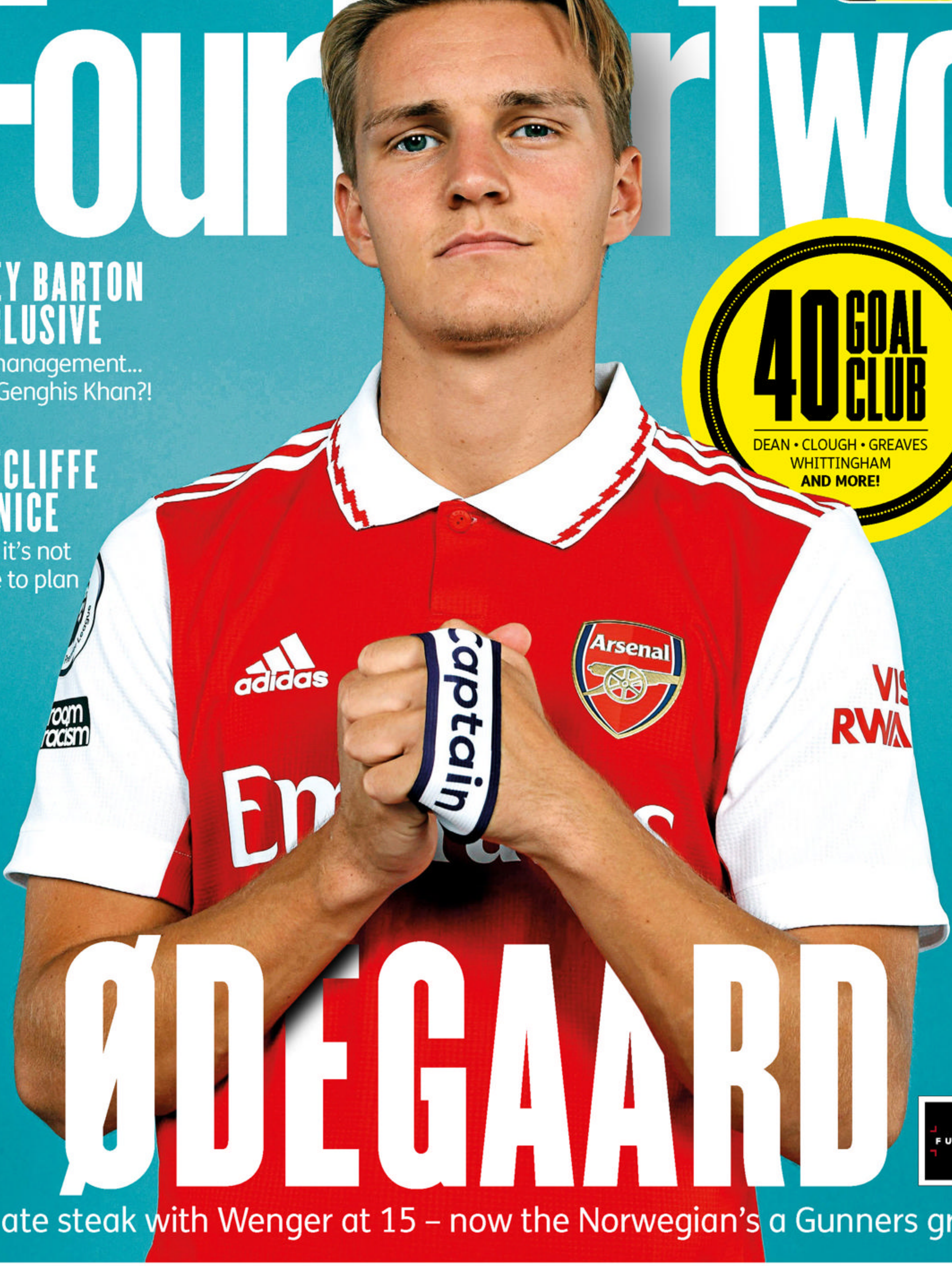

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WELCOME

This season's title race has already provided many twists and turns – there will almost certainly be more in the final few weeks of the campaign.

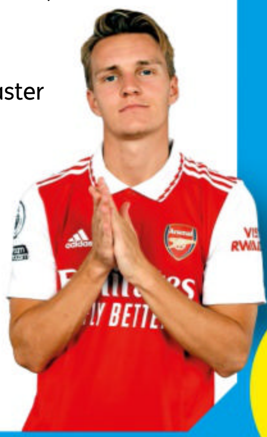
Whether it's Manchester City or Arsenal who come out on top at the end of May, we can be pretty sure of one thing: a Norwegian will have played a key role in winning the title.

Erling Haaland has had plenty of words written about him – including in this magazine – but what about the man aiming to guide Arsenal to their first crown since 2004?

Once one of the most talked about youngsters in world football, Martin Ødegaard has realised his potential and become one of best players in the Premier League this season. After a difficult time at Real Madrid, we chart his highs and lows, from teen to talisman, by talking to those who were there to witness them.

Joey Barton has never been short of an opinion, and the Bristol Rovers gaffer didn't disappoint when we sat down with him to chat about management, literature, court cases, philosophy, defensive corners, Genghis Khan and much more.

Finally, I'm delighted to welcome broadcaster Jules Breach to the pages of *FFT* – each month, our new columnist will be bringing us insider views on the biggest talking points across the game. Enjoy the mag.



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1. Why John Terry begged a snooker star to attend a key match for luck
2. Which club's fans chucked explosives at a penalty taker to put him off
3. Which nephew of an Asian monarch played for AFC Newbury
4. Which cricket great was also the chairman of Melchester Rovers
5. Which England international was challenged to a fight by Liam Gallagher

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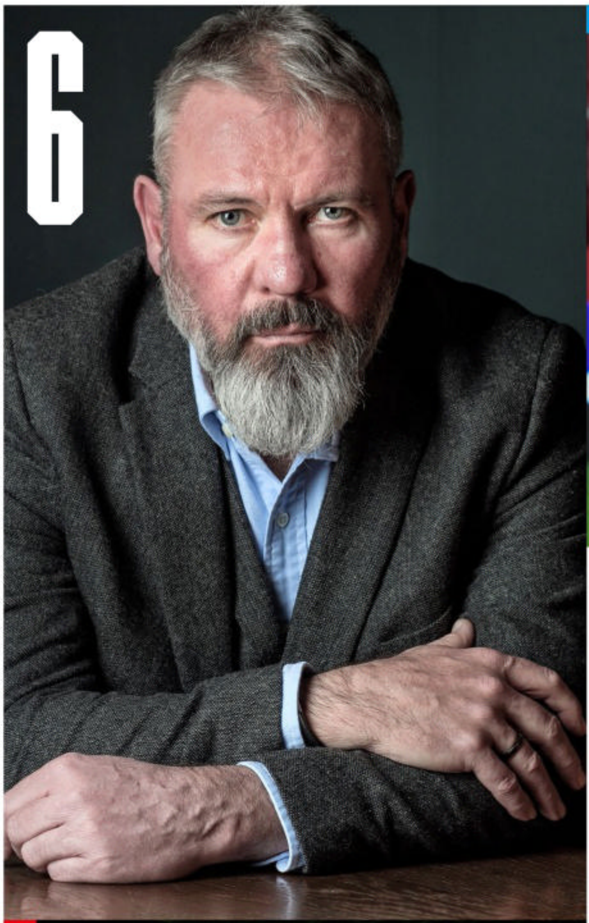

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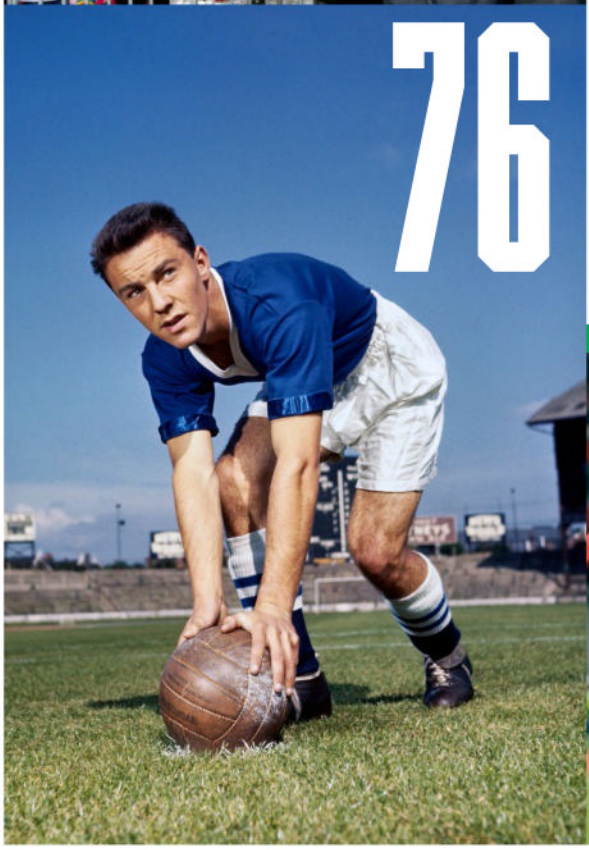

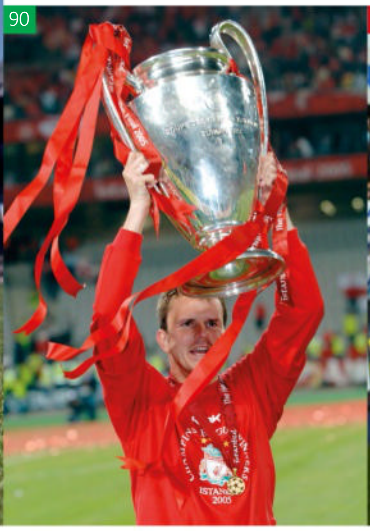

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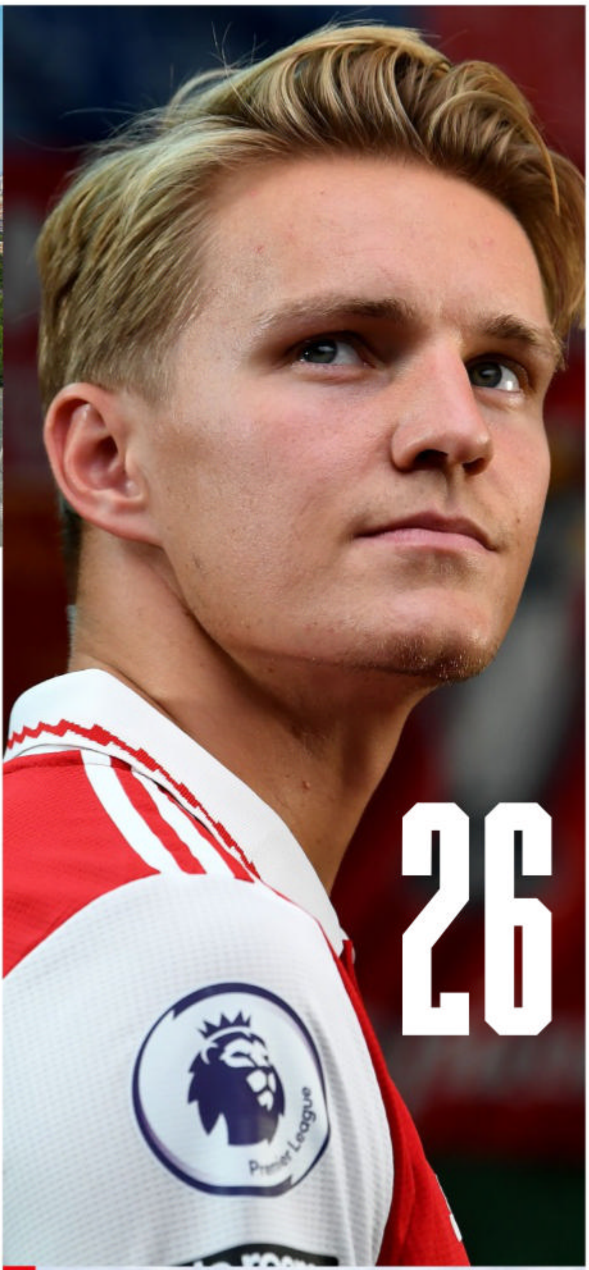

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YOU ASK THE QUESTIONS

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“Noel Gallagher washed my car before he was famous. He was partial to a Penguin... Liam just wanted a scrap with Nicky Butt”

BRIAN McCLAIR

Don’t be deceived by the near-perennially stony face. Brian McClair has a mischievous side.

Over the years, the Scot has been able to convince the world that his middle name was Tarquin and the newspapers that Manchester United’s players had been microchipped so that Alex Ferguson could track where they were at all times.

As a Glasgow University-educated mathematician, McClair was never your typical footballer, and his diary in the official Old Trafford magazine has remained so legendary that he was encouraged to start his own podcast in early 2021. *Life With Brian* welcomes regular guests to swap anecdotes, and has developed a real following.

“During lockdown, people said they liked listening to it while they were out walking, as a distraction,” he tells *FourFourTwo*. “It’s enjoyable to do. I’d started listening to humorous things myself before that, rather than the doom and gloom of the Government press conferences. I thought, ‘I haven’t been doing enough laughing’.”

McClair isn’t one to burst into regular guffaws à la Micah Richards – his sense of humour is drier than the Sahara, and delivered with a poker face that rarely slips. However, the 59-year-old certainly isn’t short of great stories from a career that saw him win league titles on both sides of the border...

If you hadn’t become a footballer, what career would you have chosen?
Omer Farooq, via Twitter

The only thing I ever thought about was teaching. I had a penchant for mathematics and did that at higher education. Teachers’ holidays appeared to be a big advantage, though I know now that their holidays aren’t quite the same as when you’re a pupil... I studied part-time when I was at Motherwell in case I got an injury, or fell out of love with football, or football fell out of love with me. It got difficult when I played more. Even if I’d stayed at Motherwell and not joined Celtic, I would have left university to give myself the greatest chance of success. I’m still waiting to go back – that was my promise to myself in 1983. I wouldn’t do maths, though. I can’t remember anything about it now. Just quadratic equations.

How was your time in the youth system at Aston Villa, and why did you stay for only a year?
Dylan Sharp, Solihull

It wasn’t really my choice. In those times, you weren’t prepared at all – you left school and they expected you to behave like a man at 16. It’s about one opinion only: the coach responsible for your age group. The youth-team coach didn’t fancy me as a player and I didn’t play as much as I would have liked. I don’t know how they found out that I had applied for uni – I only applied as something to do, just in case – but I got called in to see Ron Saunders, who had just won the league with the first team. He said, “You’ve applied for uni? Well, you can f**k off to Scotland now.” The youth development officer took me to the digs, and I packed my bags and got on the train that afternoon.

What was it like to play under Jock Wallace at Motherwell? He had a reputation for being something of a hard taskmaster...
James Reid, via Facebook

Jock and his assistant, Frank Connor, were like bad cop and even worse cop. In the first training session, the tie-up on my socks had come loose and Jock shouted something at me – I couldn’t understand a word, but one of the players told me to get my socks up. From then until the moment I left, he never stopped shouting at me. It was stereo: him in one ear and Frank in the other... It took me a very long time to understand that they were looking out for my best interests – they were trying to cajole me to perform better in all aspects. Jock was tough but fair.

Who was scarier: Jock Wallace or Alex Ferguson?
Lachlan Wilson, Bellshill

They were both pretty bad! It’s a close call, but Fergie never threatened to punch my face off as Jock Wallace did. We played a League Cup game against Clyde: I scored, we were winning and I thought we were doing quite well. Then, at half-time, because I didn’t react to anything – my face was the same stonewall that it is a lot of the time now – he totally lost it. He said, “I hate that face. F**king do something – cry, smile, laugh, whatever. I’m going to punch that f**king face off.” My team-mates’ mouths were wide open at that. We lost 4-3 after extra time, came in after the game, and I felt like ▸

TEAMS
1981-83 Motherwell
1983-87 Celtic
1987-98 Manchester United
1998 Motherwell

COUNTRY
1986-93 Scotland

just walking straight out. I thought, ‘I can’t go back if I’m going to get that – we were winning at half-time’. But he came in after the game and said, “That’s what I’m expecting from you”. I was completely perplexed.

As a teenager, you scored a hat-trick against Rangers and then two goals against Celtic. Were those matches key in earning a move to Parkhead?
Sophia Dawson, Manchester
I think that brought me to people’s attention, yeah. Before that, I wasn’t playing regularly and I’d never played as a forward, but Jock and Frank said, “We think you might be able to play up front.” I thought they were a pair of dafties. But I played a youth-team game and scored a hat-trick, and then I played on the Saturday for the first team and scored. I had a really good run from Christmas to the end of the season, and everyone was interested in me. Billy McNeill signed me at Celtic but then he left, David Hay came in, and he brought Frank Connor with him! I used to call him the little madman; I thought, ‘I am not going to escape this…’

Love Street in 1986: a last-gasp title win for Celtic against the odds. I was there, as you scored twice away at St Mirren. That has to be up there with your top moments as a player…
Murray Hutt, via Facebook
Yeah, it was a great day. Hearts were top, going into the last game, and they only needed a draw. Even if they lost, there needed to be a four-goal swing in goal difference. We’d had to win all of our last seven games before that.

On the last day, we were four up at half-time. We scored a fifth, Hearts were drawing 0-0 at Dundee, and we were just waiting for news. People in the crowd were listening on radios. Then it came through that there had been a goal. All the supporters were celebrating – but it quickly died down because somebody said Kidd had scored and we thought, ‘Oh no, it’s Walter Kidd for Hearts – that’s it, then’. But then it erupted again: it was Albert Kidd who had scored for Dundee, not Walter Kidd for Hearts. Then there was another eruption from the supporters, as Albert Kidd had scored again.

They were scenes of great joy, and that day I was also involved in one of the best goals I was ever involved in: a combination move featuring four or five players, before I knocked the ball across for Mo Johnston to score. A great assist by me! [*FFT*: There may be a question about some more famous assists later on…] Is there? Yeah, my assists defined my career!

Clockwise from below
“A pair of dafties” put Choccy up front and the rest is history; McClair scored against Rangers in the 1984 League Cup Final…; …but Rangers won in extra time; that poker face would get him into trouble; Cup Winners’ Cup… winners; “Come on, boss, I did clean it up after”; man of the match in the ’92 League Cup Final; and another cup win in ’94

Is it true that you and Mo Johnston didn’t get along, despite being a great strike duo, as you didn’t share his penchant for partying?
Michael Maguire, via Facebook
We got on fine, but we were different characters. I liked to read and just go home; I never saw Maurice reading anything. I never saw Maurice at all, for that matter… He’d come in, get changed, train, get changed again and be off. But he was a great player.

Be honest: what did you think of your nickname, Choccy?
Barry O’Loughlin, via Facebook
It came about during pre-season with Celtic. We were in Switzerland, playing Basel on a baking hot day. These two Celtic supporters on the terrace were dressed inappropriately – long trousers, jumpers, scarves, hats and big coats, when it was 90 degrees in the shade – and one of them shouted, “On you go, Chocolate McClair.” Tommy Burns decided he liked that and it annoyed me, so he kept calling me Chocolate and it stuck, then got abbreviated. But I like it, because of its uniqueness.

What did it mean to win the 1987 European Bronze Boot with 35 league goals in your last season at Celtic?
Amy Hart, Paisley
I didn’t win the Bronze Boot. I finished fourth, but the Romanian bloke that won it scored a crazy number of goals as they won something like the last 10 games with ridiculous scores [Rodion Camataru was stripped of the Golden Boot having amassed 20 goals in the final six games for Dinamo Bucharest, run by the Ministry of the Interior]. So, I should have been third.

> “I GOT AWAY WITH A LOT UNTIL CANTONA ARRIVED. HE BECAME THE FAVOURITE THEN”

Did Alex Ferguson give any indication why he didn’t select you for the 1986 World Cup, yet made you one of his first signings at Manchester United?
‘Jkeenan’, via Twitter
No, we never spoke about it. He took over as Scotland boss after a traumatic day when Jock Stein passed away; I hadn’t been involved with Scotland at that point and he has always been about trust, loyalty and respect, so he chose a group he trusted. I signed for Manchester United when Celtic had suspended my contract talks and David Hay told me that they were interested – Tottenham and Chelsea as well. In Scotland, you’re allowed an English team as well as a Scottish team and Manchester United were mine, so the decision was whether to stay at Celtic or go to Manchester United. I ruled out joining Tottenham, Chelsea, Köln, several Belgian teams and, I think, one French club.

You’d played at Old Trafford in 1984, but for Celtic against Rapid Vienna in the Cup Winners’ Cup. Was that odd?
Hayden Doyle, Dublin
Yeah, we beat Rapid Vienna but one of their players was hit by a coin and came out at the end of the game with swathes of bandages wrapped around his head, and UEFA reversed the result. Originally they awarded them the tie, but said on appeal that we could play a one-off match at Old Trafford. The problem for us was the pitch, which cost us that night. We lost 1-0. It was a bitter experience.

What did it mean to you to become the first Manchester United player to score 20 league goals in a season since George Best 20 years earlier?
Ollie Lowe, Sale
There was no real satisfaction in that: my whole idea of playing football was to win things, and although we were second to Liverpool that year, we were never close. I never scored 20 league goals again, but we won plenty.

Were you always confident that Alex Ferguson would prove a success at Manchester United? Were the players ever close to losing faith?
Harry Saunders, Glossop
No, not at all. In 1989-90 we were having a torrid league campaign: we went 11 league games without a win, which is quite an effort for any team, never mind Manchester United. The manager was pilloried every single day in every media outlet – he would have been trolled all over social media had it been available then. But he never criticised any of us publicly, not once. He generated togetherness. All of the time, he would say, “Nobody likes you; nobody likes Manchester United; they all hate you; it’s us and them.”

There was no atmosphere around the club that there was any danger of him going, because we could see the roots of things he’d put in place – he’d rejuvenated the youth policy, and in training you could see the ability those young players had – but we couldn’t win a game of football. There were a few matches where I think we may have got relegated if we hadn’t won, as a lot of players with the character we needed, like Steve Bruce and Bryan Robson, were out injured. We went to Millwall and it really was a lions’ den, and even fervent United supporters would do well to name our line-up, but we won; otherwise, we may have been dragged into a relegation battle. The games en route to winning the FA Cup that season were a bit of a relief from the league, even though they all had moments where we could have lost.

When Manchester United won the Cup Winners’ Cup in 1991, what did it mean for the club and for the fans to be allowed back into Europe, after the ban on English clubs was lifted?
Vinnie Burton, Knutsford
I loved the European games at Celtic. I’d missed those. The ban was the ban and it got lifted at the right time for us. In the first round, we played Pecsi Munkas in Hungary, and about 30 lads travelled dressed as Father Christmas. I don’t know where they got Father Christmas outfits in August – maybe all Manchester United supporters have them? Then we played Wrexham and the manager said, “We’ve got to go to Wales overnight”. We thought he was joking. It’s closer than a load of league games; we’ve got to go overnight? He said, “It’s in the rules.” Wrexham had to do the same thing: travel just over the border and stay in a hotel before they played at Old Trafford.

Can you talk us through the infamous 1990 incident with Arsenal and Nigel Winterburn at Old Trafford, when you responded to a tackle by kicking him while he was on the ground?
Chris Sergeant, via Instagram
Sometimes players go into a red zone and do daft things. It was a bad tackle by Nigel on Denis Irwin – he could have done far more damage than he did – and I went into the red zone. Nigel and I had history. It started when I missed a penalty at Highbury and Nigel was screaming in my face. Then there was a game where I was shaking him up and down and he was pretending to be knocked out. This time, because it was him, because it was a bad tackle, you do something and it ended up in... well, I only found out later that it was a 20-man brawl. I thought it was 21 until Clayton Blackmore said recently, “No, I didn’t get involved.” I thought, ‘Oh, that’s good to know. Charming. That’s good of you...’ [*Smiles*]

Fergie used to tell us, “You should be happy that *he’s* playing, and *he’s* playing – if anything happens, he’ll be your shoulder”, and that was the case. It was the same for Arsenal: they were sticking up for their team-mate. I had ▸

never been sent off at any level, and I thought, 'Well this is me now – I'm getting sent off. You can't be doing that on a football pitch'. Then Keith Hackett comes over, books Nigel Winterburn, plays on. I thought, 'That's impossible...' Anders Limpar punched me in the side of the head from behind and then ran away like a schoolboy, so there could have been a few sent off – not just me. Subsequently there was a two-point deduction for Arsenal and one for United. Even then, the FA could have taken action. I don't know how I got away with that; you'd get a fairly reasonable suspension for it now.

Have you and Winterburn made up?
Greg Morter, via Facebook
Not too long afterwards, we had the displeasure of visiting Highbury and giving them a guard of honour, as they'd won the league. I went up to Nigel and said, "We've got to call an end to this before somebody gets hurt." We shook hands and that was it. I don't hold anything against him – he's been on my podcast and he was good, although he seems to not remember as many things about it as I do. He said he hadn't watched it since; I said, "Well let me tell you, Nigel: I kicked you twice, but I didn't kick you hard enough..." [*Laughs*]

Clockwise from right
McClair scored one of his two Scotland goals at Euro 92; Blackmore not pictured; "Oh, did we win again?"; going back to the boot room was very satisfying; but not as much as making up stuff for a magazine

HIGHS & LOWS

LOW: 1981
Leaves Aston Villa after only one year as apprentice at club

HIGH: 1986
Scores twice at St Mirren as Celtic win title on last day of season

HIGH: 1990
Part of Manchester United team that wins FA Cup

LOW: 1990
Left out of Scotland's World Cup squad, after playing in qualifiers

HIGH: 1993
Helps Manchester United to first league title in 26 years

What was your favourite memory of Euro 92 with Scotland, apart from scoring your first international goal?
John Bleasdale, via Twitter
I wouldn't say I had a wonderful Scotland career – I couldn't buy a goal – but that was great. In the first game at the Euros, we played the Dutch and I played on the left of midfield, directly opposite Ruud Gullit. They kicked off, they passed it forward, I had him in my sight, and then like a puff of smoke I didn't have him in my sight. I turned round and he was 20 yards the other side of me – I thought, 'I am going to have a real tough day'.

My goal was a deflected one in the last game against the CIS. It might go to the Dubious Goals Panel, but it says in the records that I scored. [*FFT*: Were you disappointed that your goal was a Pointless answer on the quiz show?] No, I love *Pointless*, so it's good being an answer! I've been on *The Chase*, too, about Jaffa Cakes. At United, I'd go with Gordon Strachan to buy custard creams or, if we were feeling flush, McVitie's chocolate biscuits. Then the manager appointed a dietitian who persuaded us that because Jaffa Cakes had sponge and jam in them, it fitted his idea of nutrition. The club would buy thousands of Jaffa Cakes, and encourage you all of the time to have another. I'd say, "I can't eat another Jaffa Cake!" We ate so many, I said I couldn't look at a Jaffa Cake any more, and the question on *The Chase* was who said that. It was me!

How did Noel Gallagher wind up washing your car? Is it true you have one of Oasis' original demo tapes?
Matthew Jones, Derby
That's what Noel and Liam were doing at the time. A lad called Paul Ashbee had a car washing business – he had started washing the cars at Man City by saying he'd wash the manager's car for nothing if he could wash the players' cars. He came over to United and he was brazen: he just waited for Fergie to come out and then said the same thing. Fergie said yes, and two of his helpers were Liam and Noel.

One day, Noel came to my house with Paul to wash my car. He never said a word, apart from "Thank you" after I gave him coffee and chocolate biscuits. Paul said, "Listen to that." I don't think it was a demo. It was just a tape – their songs before they were famous. I said, "Aye, they're not a bad Beatles soundalike." Then they started releasing their first stuff, and no more shammies and sponges were needed. I haven't seen Noel since then. I'm sure he'll probably deny this, but it's a fact: he was quite partial to a Penguin.

I saw Liam again later on. We were out somewhere and he was saying to Nicky Butt, "I'm the hardest in Oasis. You think you're the hardest at United? Let's sort this out – we'll have a scrap". There hadn't been any conversation or fall-out, and Liam wasn't drunk. It was funny. A fight didn't happen. Butty just said, "Pfft, whatever..."

How did Fergie react when you were caught writing an offensive word in the snow under his office at the Cliff?
Mark Butler, via Facebook
He reacted, when I was getting to the tickly part, by opening the window and screaming, "Don't take another f**king step!" [*Smiles*] At that point, I thought, 'Why am I doing this?' I thought he'd sack me, because everyone could see it – this was on the pitch at the Cliff, with everyone banging on the windows in encouragement. I scrubbed it out and walked back in. I got away with it. I got away with a lot until Eric Cantona came. Then he became the favourite...

What was it like to be involved in a Manchester United team that won its first league title for 26 years?
Sam Williams, Oxford
In 1987, when Alex Ferguson said, "I'm going to rebuild a football club; do you want to be part of it?" – and he didn't say 'team'; he said 'club' – that was the main reason why I said, "Yeah, I'd love to be part of that." Not in my wildest imagination did I think it would end up how it did. We were so disappointed in 1992 when we could have won the league but Leeds won it, so to then win it the next season was a tremendous achievement. We were bottom after two or three matches. We won our last

seven, and that's what wins you titles: going on a run at just the right time.

We would have won it anyway, but Oldham had a wonderful result at Villa Park on the Sunday to hand us the title and allow us an incredible night at Old Trafford against Blackburn on Monday. [*FFT*: Did you also have a good Sunday night?] The manager told us all not to watch the Villa game, but you couldn't not watch it. Afterwards, I got a call to say that Steve Bruce had spoken to the manager and it was fine to go round to Steve's house for a couple of beers. Most of us finally left at 4am. When we arrived for the Blackburn match and the manager saw us, all he said was, "You'd better f**king win this game." That was his team talk. And we won.

> "CLAYTON BLACKMORE TOLD ME RECENTLY HE WASN'T IN THE 21-MAN BRAWL. CHARMING..."

You assisted two great Manchester United goals: David Beckham from halfway against Wimbledon, and Eric Cantona's chip against Sunderland. Which were you prouder of?

Joe Rawlings, via Twitter

Eric's was when we had to go on a run to win the championship. For me, that game started it off. He hit a terrible pass to me – I had to stop and drag it back into my path – then when I gave him the ball back, you knew from the moment he hit it that it was going in. Then a trademark celebration from Eric, and I gave him a little cuddle.

For Beckham's goal, I thought I was going to get a hairdryer, because the game was won so the manager told me to go on and slow the game down. I got the ball inside the centre circle and played a very short pass to David, expecting him to pass it back and we could keep hold of the ball. I could see from his body shape, though, that he was going to shoot and I was going to get a hairdryer. Then he hit it and I thought, 'That's not a bad hit'. I think, even though David scored, I got a row for giving him the ball. Those were the standards Ferguson expected: do what you're told to do. I did what I was told, but David messed it up!

Is it true that Alex Ferguson once played in a friendly in Bermuda, and no one would pass to him?

Stefan Stevens, King's Lynn

Aye, that was [assistant] Archie Knox's idea. He said, "Don't pass the ball to him." The manager was making some great runs and he was raging about it! To compound it, Archie then scored...

Why didn't you go into management, as a lot of other players who played under Alex Ferguson did?

Adam Smith, via Facebook

I did go into management: I was the manager of Manchester United's academy. Going back to the idea of me being a teacher, when I started working with young people and trying to help them, I loved it so much that I was happy doing what I was doing. Tenures tend to be longer in academy football. I stayed there for 14 years, trusted by Alex Ferguson to look after that part of his club, and I loved it.

Of the young talent you saw coming through, who impressed you most?

Matthew Theobald, via Facebook

You had your favourites. Some weren't the best players. But the whole idea was to make sure they couldn't find out who your favourites were. Tommy Heaton was brilliant: once, because of circumstances, we didn't have enough players, so he played right wing and scored. Scott McTominay has the same birthday as me. People doubted him, but you stick with him because you see there's something in him. He had great desire and overcame those difficulties.

How long will you grow your beard?

Mark Butler, via Facebook

I'm not too sure. I started it off as an experiment during lockdown. I have had it trimmed a few times, but it allows comments like I'm channelling my inner Gandalf, or allows me to reply to suggestions that I might be homeless. I think I do it because it annoys my mother...

In your playing days, how did you end up writing Choccy's Diary for the Manchester United magazine?

Trevor Spillane, via Instagram

We went on tour to South Africa and somebody at the magazine asked me, "Would you be interested in writing a diary?" It got published and seemed to be quite popular, so they asked if I'd do more. People started coming to tell me things – even kids, telling me funny things happening in the reserve-team dressing room – and sometimes I had to decide whether I was going to get away with stuff or not. The manager had given his blessing that I could do a diary, but a few times I got a row for things I included. [*FFT*: Did you ever just make anything up?] Loads of times – it was one of my favourite bits. I said every player had a little chip sewn into the back of their hand, so that they were being picked up by satellite and the manager would know where they were every minute of the day. It ended up in the papers as a real story. Not as some spoof in *Viz* – a proper story!

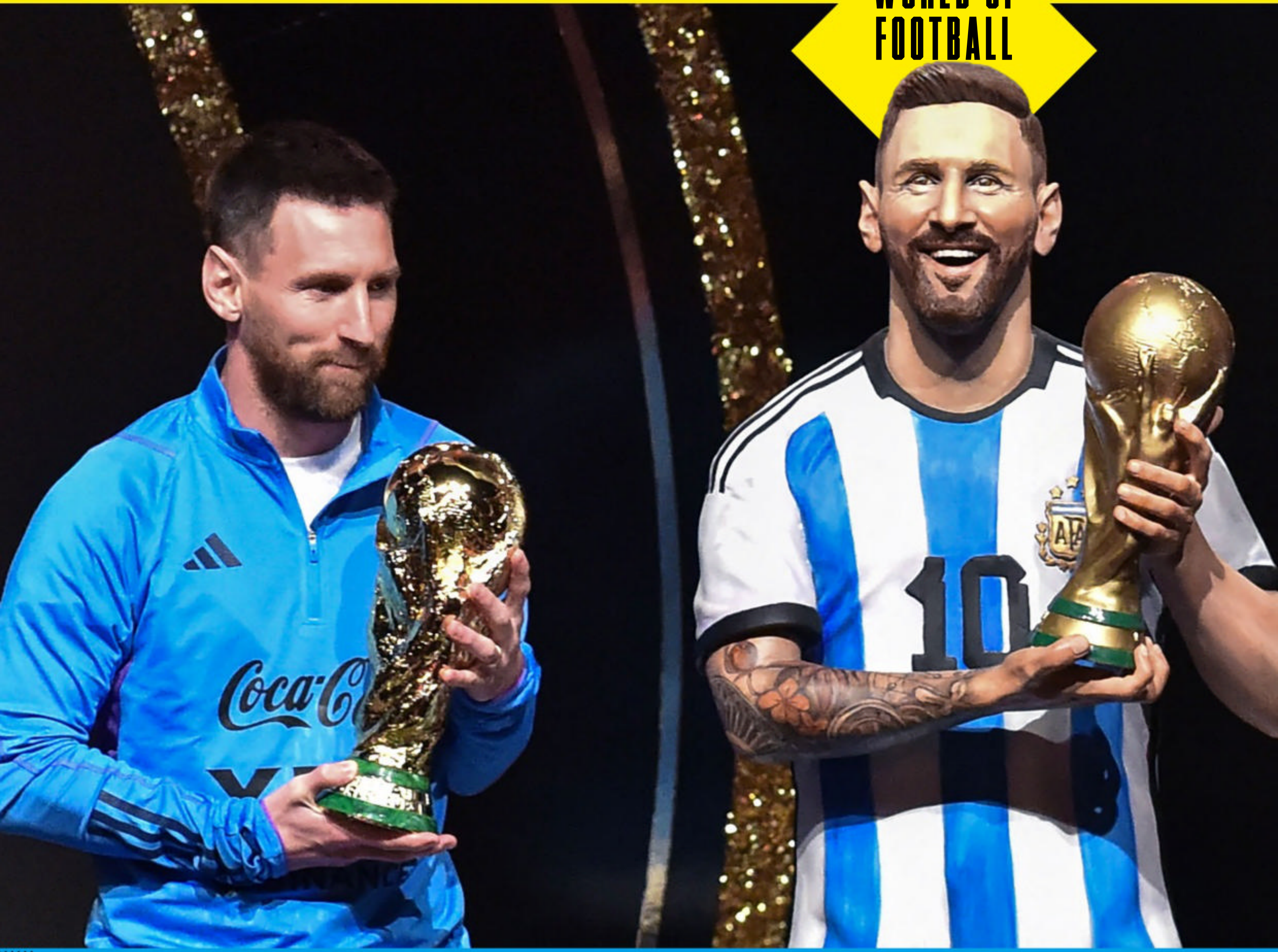
Is your middle name really Tarquin?

Lucas Watson, Rochdale

[*Smiles*] In *Shoot!*, there used to be a questionnaire with a footballer and the answers were always the same. They'd always say they listened to George Benson or Luther Vandross – great musicians, but I thought, 'Come on, who do you actually like?' I thought that if I ever got the opportunity to do it, I'd give different answers. Most of them were truthful. Not all of them...

A long time later, a bloke told me that he had won the tie-breaker in a pub quiz because of my middle name. I thought, 'Why would anyone have a tie-breaker question of my middle name, when it's John?' He said, "Yes, I won the tie-breaker, Tarquin!" Then I remembered. In the very first questionnaire I did, I'd called myself Brian Tarquin McClair, because they sent you a form to fill in and you sent it back. The daft thing is that someone thought, 'That's a great tie-breaker question', and that there was a guy who actually knew the answer!

McClair's podcast, 'Life With Brian', is available now on a range of platforms



MEANWHILE IN...

...Paraguay, CONMEBOL weren't content with just having one Lionel Messi – they wanted two Lionel Messis

1 "WILL THE REAL LIONEL MESSI PLEASE STAND UP?"

When CONMEBOL decided to host a special 'Night of the Stars', the audience could have been forgiven for rubbing their eyes and fearing that they were seeing double. "Look, there's Lionel Messi! But hang on, isn't that other guy Lionel Messi, too?"

No, it wasn't the big reveal of the Argentine's secret twin brother, sent out on to the pitch when Messi's tired to stroll around disinterested and hope no one notices it's not really him (although it would explain a lot about Bayern 8-2 Barcelona).

Instead, this was the unveiling of a statue of 'the Flea' at the federation's museum on the outskirts of Paraguayan capital Asuncion – the exhibition already had statues of Pele with the 1970 World Cup and Diego Maradona with the 1986 trophy, so it was only fitting that they added one of Messi from Qatar.

The 35-year-old was also awarded the 'ceremonial baton of football' by CONMEBOL president Alejandro Dominguez – thankfully not the same one recently used by various riot police in Naples, to club travelling England fans over the head.

2 WING AND A PRAYER

What's the easiest way of livening up a Dutch second division fixture between VVV-Venlo and Roda JC? Er, Cloud Angels.

In the tradition of club sponsors bringing along their own mascot, like the magnificent Boiler Man at West Bromwich Albion, VVV welcomed the winged wonders as part of a link-up with local company Conect Telecom.

Perhaps hoping the angels could guide VVV as they try to ascend to heaven/the Eredivisie, the plan sadly backfired and they were held to a disappointing 1-1 draw. Mind you, the last time VVV were in the top flight, they were humiliated 13-0 by Ajax: that's not our idea of heaven, to be honest...

3 A SLIGHT FLARE-UP

The A-League's Melbourne derby descended into violence before Christmas – four months later, the teams returned to finish the match.

Melbourne Victory fans threw flares and a bucket at Melbourne City keeper Tom Glover, forcing an abandonment – both sets of supporters were already angry after discovering that the Grand Final was being moved to Sydney (the league's top team usually hosts).

The match restarted from the 22nd minute in early April – ex-Burnley man Aiden O'Neill put City 1-0 ahead in the original fixture and made it 2-0 when it resumed, meaning he'd scored two goals in the same game, 109 days apart. No one clonked him on the bonce with a bucket, either: win-win.

4 "GERONIMO!"

Fans have been coming up with novel and increasingly dangerous ways to put off penalty takers – from snowballs to, er, explosives.

In Norway, Tromso's Vegard Erlien had a snowball lobbed at him as he struck the ball during a shootout in a cup match at IK Start, prompting the referee to switch the rest of the kicks to the other end of the ground.

Erlien scored anyway: not the case in Albania, where KF Tirana fans threw firecrackers before Bruno Telushi took a penalty for Partizani. Telushi missed, almost as if distracted by the chance of being blown up in his run-up.

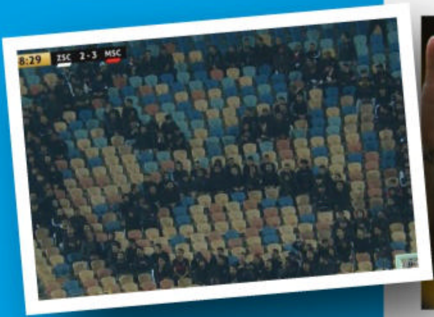
PS: no actual tortoises were hurt here, but the explosives stock photo we found was too weird not to use.

5 "THE TOP FLIGHT IS GOING TO BE GREAT!"

Airbus UK Broughton were all smiles when they secured promotion back to Wales' top flight a year ago – it hasn't gone as well as they hoped.

The Wingmakers reached the Europa League three times in the 2010s, but later got relegated and haven't fared well on their return. Deducted three points for fielding an ineligible player, they lost 28 of their first 29 matches, were relegated in February, lost three more three points for fielding another ineligible player, and sat on -5 points.

An early April draw at Aberystwyth did at least halt a 21-match, 197-day losing streak – surely worthy of more celebrations, mainly to mark this torrid campaign finally coming to an end.



6 "WHAT ARE YOU FROWNING AT?"

Last month, *FFT* brought you news that Zamalek president Mortada Mansour had been imprisoned for defaming the head of rival club Al Ahly – this month, he turned his ire on his own club's fans.

When Zamalek went out of the African Champions League group stage with a game to spare, then trailed their final fixture to Sudanese side Al Merrikh (formerly managed by Lee Clark), supporters arranged themselves into an angry face emoji to show their disapproval.

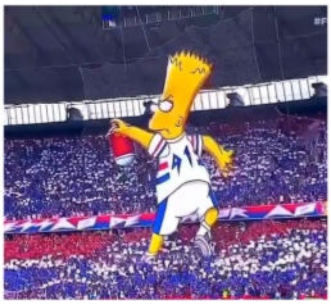
Mansour's response? Fresh from jail, he vowed to ban the protestors from ever attending Zamalek games again. How to win friends and influence people, Mortada style...

7 THE NEW GUILIANI

When Donald Trump needed legal representation for his high-profile Stormy Daniels case, he knew exactly who to turn to – the owner of Italian Serie B strugglers SPAL, of course.

Joe Tacopina is an American lawyer who previously represented Michael Jackson, before joining a consortium at AS Roma. He left to buy Bologna in 2014, lasting only 13 months as their owner, then deciding to buy Venezia instead. Ousted there as well in 2020, he next purchased SPAL.

Vowing to deliver the Scudetto to Venice did seem a bit eccentric, so we can see why Trump brought him in to follow Rudy Giuliani. His aim? Not to hold any press conferences at Four Seasons Total Landscaping, and he'd already be an improvement on Rudy.



8 AY, CARAMBA!

Ultras at Brazilian top-flight side Fortaleza have an unlikely hero: cartoon character Bart Simpson.

Situated on the country's north-east coast, the club have made their first ever forays into the Copa Libertadores in the past two years, with supporters adopting Bart as an unofficial mascot – unveiling a tifo of the *Simpsons* star ahead of a game against rivals Ceara.

When the teams clashed again last year, Ceara responded by displaying a tifo of Bart's nemesis, Sideshow Bob, but Fortaleza remained undeterred – out came another Bart tifo for this April's latest showdown. Aiming a spray can, presumably straight into Bob's eyes, Fortaleza forced Ceara to step on a number of metaphorical rakes in the match, defeating their enemies 2-1.

9 "HEY, SHERGAR IS TRYING TO SLEEP!"

Veenhuizen's match with Vitesse '63 went pretty smoothly – well, apart from an angry bloke riding on to the pitch on a moped.

The two teams were facing off in an eighth-tier relegation fixture in the Netherlands when said angry bloke appeared out of nowhere, rode across the field to harangue coaching staff, rode back on to the pitch to argue with players, then rode off again.

It wasn't even the match that had upset him – the chap was a local resident, irked that exuberant fans had set off fireworks, frightening his horse. Stunned, Veenhuizen quickly went 3-0 down and couldn't recover – the proverbial horse had bolted by then. Possibly the actual horse, too.

"THE CALIBRE OF PLAYERS THAT FOLLOWED BECKHAM AND MYSELF IN MLS IS SOMETHING I'M PROUD OF"

ROBBIE KEANE

GAMES THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

Norwich 0-2 Wolves

August 9, 1997
First Division

"As a young kid who'd just turned 17, making my senior debut for Wolves changed my life. I'd been called up to the first team a month beforehand in pre-season – I'd never played for the reserves; I went straight from the youth team into the first team. My mum and dad were at Carrow Road and I scored twice. The first was a left-footed volley from 20 yards, which was brilliant, and my second was a cheeky goal, skipping past a defender and poking the ball through the goalkeeper's legs. Scoring a brace on my debut for Coventry two years later, after becoming the most expensive teenage signing by a British club, helped to put me on the map in the Premier League. But to do that on my Wolves debut was fantastic and gave me more confidence to kick on."

Germany 1-1 Rep of Ireland

June 5, 2002
World Cup

"Playing at a World Cup was magical, and to score three goals made it extra special. I turned 14 midway through USA 94 and to watch that Ireland side was incredible, seeing how much joy they gave the nation. There were flags outside people's houses, and everyone was running out on to the streets to celebrate Ray Houghton's winning goal against Italy at Giants Stadium. Seeing that spurred me on to want to play at a World Cup finals one day, and I was really lucky to do that in 2002. We did so well in Japan and South Korea – we only lost against Spain on penalties in the last 16, a game I feel we probably should have won. Scoring the equaliser against Germany in the group stage, in the second minute of injury time, made me more recognised internationally."

Tottenham 2-1 Chelsea

February 24, 2008
League Cup Final

"When you're a kid, you play 'Wembley' with your friends on the street. Then when you're finally there, walking out at Wembley Stadium in a major final, it's a dream come true. It'd been such a long time since Tottenham had won a trophy, stretching back to when they beat Nottingham Forest 2-1 in the 1991 FA Cup Final. To do it against Chelsea, especially, was absolutely huge. Back then, they were like how Manchester City are now, in terms of their financial clout and the number of star players they had in their squad. People didn't give us a chance of beating them in the final, but I started up front alongside Dimitar Berbatov, who equalised from the penalty spot. Jonathan Woodgate then popped up with a winner for us in extra time, which was a great feeling."

LA Galaxy 2-1 New England

December 7, 2014
MLS Cup Final

"I look back on all the goals I scored in my career with wonderful memories – I was fortunate enough to get many, including for LA Galaxy after I moved there in 2011. It was a massive time in terms of the success we had – we won three MLS Cups over my five and a half years at the club. I feel David Beckham and I helped to change MLS – more David first, when he joined LA Galaxy in 2007, then me following him. We played together in two MLS Cup finals: we beat Houston Dynamo 1-0 in 2011, and I scored a penalty when we beat them again in 2012. Two years later, I scored the extra-time winner when we defeated New England Revolution. After our spells in California, the calibre of footballers that played in the league is something I'm extremely proud of."

Interview Richard Buxton

CUP DRAMA Palestine's Yasser Arafat Cup final had to be halted when police accidentally fired tear gas bombs on to the pitch, during a stand-off in a nearby housing area

"FANCY A HELICOPTER RIDE, EMLYN?"

Long before *Ted Lasso*'s AFC Richmond, Roy Race's Melchester made it big – as did several other fictional teams

THE HURRICANES

An animated tour de force on either side of the Atlantic in the mid-90s, the Hurricanes starred on ITV featuring characters inspired by famous names, including Scottish boss 'Jock Stone'. Owned by a 16-year-old girl, they'd go off on wacky global trips – opponents included the Cairo Pharaohs and the Inverfinnan Celtics, a weird combo of Celtic, Inverness and, er, Steve Finnan?

COCO UNITED

In a Coco Pops TV ad released during the 1994 World Cup, Coco United were 10-0 behind to Amazon Forest at half-time – not even 2005's Rafael Benitez would have fancied his chances of a comeback. But spitting in the face of the superstition about not touching the cup before you've won it, Coco the Monkey filled the trophy with milk and Coco Pops – an astounding turnaround ensued, as they grabbed a late winner. Speaking to Des Lion (groan) after the match, Coco pointed to his decision to turn the milk 'all chocolatey' as the inspiration behind one of the Jungle World Cup's greatest ever comebacks.

MELCHESTER ROVERS

During Roy Race's initial 40-year stint at Melchester, the club bagged a mere nine league titles, eight FA Cups, three League Cups, three European Cups, one UEFA Cup, four Cup Winners' Cups and a partridge in a pear tree. The team also signed Emlyn Hughes and appointed Geoff Boycott as chairman, and the drama didn't end there: Race was shot and fell into a deep coma, eight players were killed in a terrorist attack and he ended his long career in the traditional fashion by picking up a bad injury… from crashing a helicopter he'd been piloting.

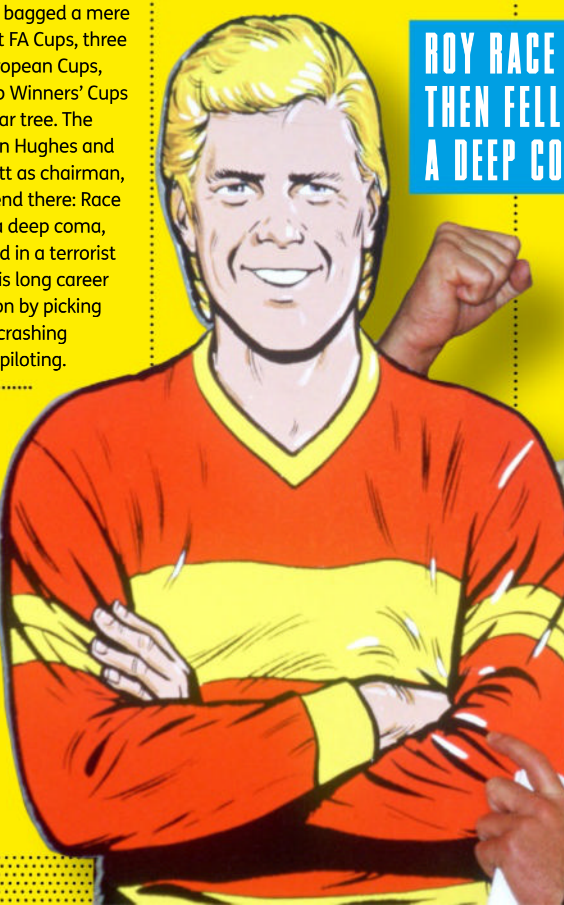
HOUNSLOW HARRIERS

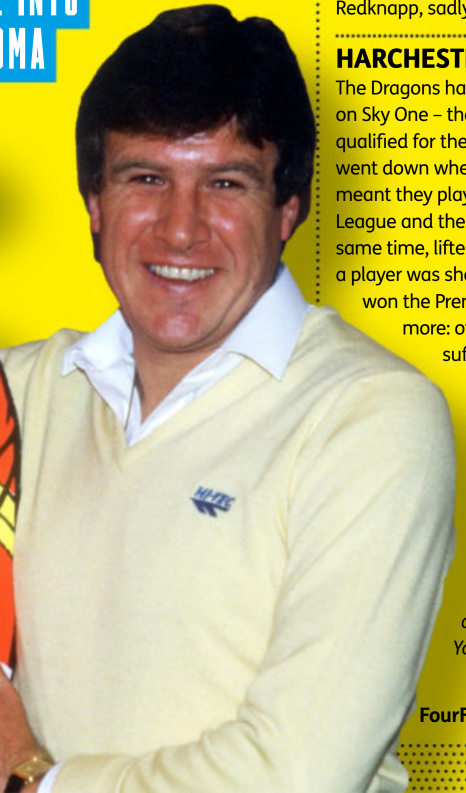
During the 2002 movie *Bend It Like Beckham*, west London's leading amateur women's team took quite a lax approach to player-coach romantic relations, but you couldn't argue with their stellar results on the field. Jesminder, Jules, Joe & Co successfully clinched the vaguely named 'championship' – Jules' classic Copa Mundial boots suggested that Keira Knightley's character might be something of a no-nonsense hard nut, which only made her Ronaldo-esque stepover to round the goalkeeper and score in the final against QPR all the more impressive. Jesminder's slo-mo free kick, all soundtracked to Nessun Dorma, secured the dramatic victory.

WIRRAL COUNTY

In the TV series sequel to *Mike Bassett: England Manager*, Bassett has lost the national job after a disastrous Euros qualifying campaign, been relegated with Newcastle, then been sacked by a lower league side – sounds like Steve McClaren's Wikipedia page. He headed to join Wirral County – a battle against relegation followed, as Wirral lost to Chester on the last day, but Mansfield went down instead on goal difference.

ROY RACE WAS SHOT, THEN FELL INTO A DEEP COMA





ALLIED PRISONERS

The side assembled for 1981's *Escape to Victory* included Pele, Bobby Moore, Ossie Ardiles, Mike Summerbee and, er, Rocky in goal. The plan to use a football match to stage an escape from a Nazi prisoner of war camp did seem to rely on an uncharacteristically relaxed attitude to security on the part of armed fascist guards, but say what you want about the plot, the football scenes did actually look like people playing football. So good was Pele's overhead kick, you just know his back was agony for the next three weeks.

RENFORD REJECTS

Broadcast on Channel 4 between 1998 and 2001, the Rejects were a team comprised of philosophers, pretend Italians, Hull fans, talented women and one dog. Jim Rosenthal and Bob Wilson made regular appearances, while Ian Rush, Martin Keown, Shaka Hislop, Gianfranco Zola, Roberto Di Matteo, John Terry and Kasey Keller also had cameo roles – as did Harry Redknapp, sadly not via a car window.

HARCHESTER UNITED

The Dragons had their ups and downs on Sky One – they avoided relegation, qualified for the Champions League, went down when a fixing controversy meant they played in the Champions League and the Championship at the same time, lifted the FA Cup before a player was shot by a sniper, then won the Premier League. There's more: off the pitch, Harchester suffered various murders, a bus crash on the way to the UEFA Cup final and, another time, the goalkeeper took the rest of the team hostage. Eventful…

Adam Clery

For content like this and more, visit FFT's YouTube channel now

VISIT THE HOME OF THE FOOTBALL QUIZ
fourfourtwo.com/quiz

THE ULTIMATE QUIZ

Solve these puzzlers, featuring a musical instrument, Shakira and Big Sam – surely a hit waiting to happen...

01 What's the name of the cuboid musical instrument invented by footballer turned property show presenter Dion Dublin?

02 Shakira's song *Waka Waka* was the official tune for which year's World Cup finals?

03 Other than Portugal's 'Big Three', Benfica, Porto and Sporting, only two clubs have ever clinched the Primeira Liga title. Who are they?

04 Which legendary duo did Thierry Henry overtake to become the all-time leading goalscorer for Arsenal and the French national team?

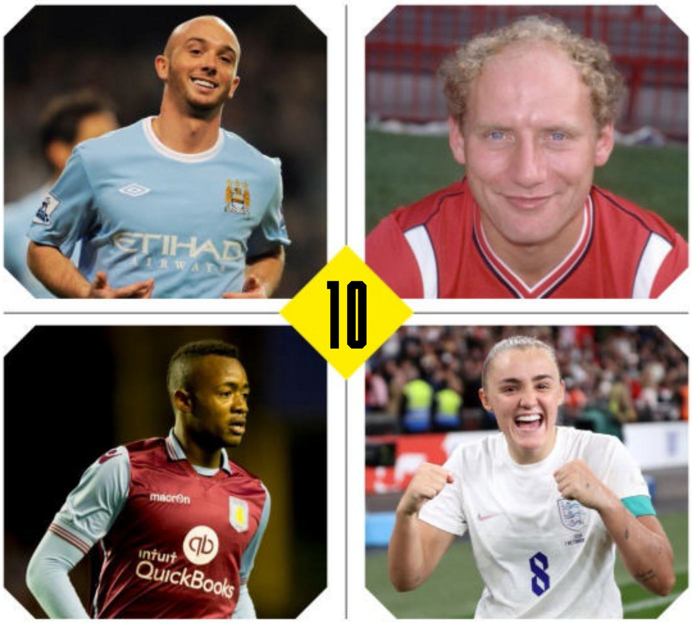
05 Which German international hit two goals to help eliminate his country of birth from Euro 2008?

06 In which year was the Bosman ruling introduced, stating that players could move on for free when their contracts expired?

07 Who was appointed manager of Bayern Munich in 1987 and took charge of them again in 2018?

08 Who's the only Premier League player to net 100 goals without bagging a hat-trick?

09 How many people have broken the world transfer record since Zinedine Zidane left Juventus for Real Madrid in 2001?



10 Identify these four players who all share their names with countries.

11 Who was joint-boss of Liverpool with Roy Evans, before taking the reins on his own?

12 Which WSL outfit did American icon Alex Morgan join on loan in September 2020?

13 Name the last team that these eight England gaffers coached prior to leading the Three Lions.

1990	Graham Taylor
1996	Glenn Hoddle
1999	Kevin Keegan
2001	Sven-Goran Eriksson
2006	Steve McClaren
2007	Fabio Capello
2012	Roy Hodgson
2016	Sam Allardyce

14 Who was the last player to win the Premier League Golden Boot outright in successive seasons?

15 Who was the only England man to score a penalty in their 2006 World Cup defeat to Portugal?

16 Who was the first PFA Players' Player of the Year winner to hail from a country outside Europe?

17 Which Southampton defender was sent off in their famous 9-0 thrashing by Leicester in 2019?

18 France regular Antoine Griezmann has never represented a French club at senior level. True or false?

1. The Dube **2.** 2010 **3.** Belenenses, Boavista **4.** Ian Wright, Michel Platini **5.** Lukas Podolski **6.** 1995 **7.** Jupp Heynckes **8.** Ryan Giggs **9.** Five (Kaka, Cristiano Ronaldo, Gareth Bale, Paul Pogba, Neymar) **10.** Stephen Ireland, Alan Brazil, Jordan Ayew, Georgia Stanway **11.** Gerard Houllier **12.** Spurs **13.** Aston Villa, Chelsea, Fulham, Lazio, Middlesbrough, Real Madrid, West Brom, Sunderland **14.** Harry Kane **15.** Owen Hargreaves **16.** Luis Suarez **17.** Ryan Bertrand **18.** True

THE NEW STEVIE G? Bulgaria's under-16s triumphed in a friendly thanks to a goal from Steven Gerard Gaote, a promising winger who's on the books of Levski Sofia

LEE BOWYER vs KIERON DYER

THE TRIGGER

Often competing with each other for a spot in Graeme Souness' Newcastle team, Bowyer and Dyer both start at home to Aston Villa in 2005. They trail 3-0 with eight minutes left – Steven Taylor has already been sent off after handling on the line, then clutching his abdomen as if he'd been shot.

THE FEUD

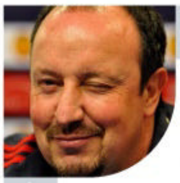
While the ball's in play and Newcastle are on the attack, Bowyer accuses Dyer of not passing to him. "It's because you're s**t," Dyer instantly fires back. Brave words, Kieron: it's Lee Bowyer, he probably won't take this well...

THE REVENGE

Bowyer doesn't take it well, marching up to Dyer, grappling with him, then starting windmilling. "I was trying to let him punch himself out," Dyer later said, employing surprisingly impressive Muhammad Ali 'rope-a-dope' tactics in such an unexpected situation. "But by the time the fourth one came along, I thought, 'F**k this' and launched one back." Ali would have been horrified.

THE OUTCOME

Inevitably, the duo are both sent off – Alan Shearer somehow complains to the ref that it's harsh, while Villa fans laugh their heads off, 7,000 feet above sea level in the away end. Just before hauling them to the post-match press conference to say sorry, Souness even reportedly challenges both to a fight himself. Yep, that'll calm things down: thankfully both decline, as Dyer rightly computes that no amount of Floyd Mayweather moves are going to stop Souey from smashing his face in.



WE'RE TALKING ABOUT FACTS | WORST PENALTY SHOOTOUT

When under-10s sides Mickleover Lightning Blue Sox and Chellaston Boys faced off in the Derby Community Cup in 1998, a 1-1 draw led to a shootout: Blue Sox won 2-1, after just three of 66 penalties were scored. Either the goals were unsuitable for small children, or Tim Krul was in nets – he was 10 in 1998, so we don't rule it out...

REQUIRED READING

'A compelling insight into football's cutting edge'
JONATHAN WILSON
2022
SHORTLIST
EXPECTED GOALS
THE STORY OF HOW DATA CONQUERED FOOTBALL AND CHANGED THE GAME FOREVER
Rory Smith

EXPECTED GOALS

Rory Smith
(Mudlark, £20)
●●●●●

In today's game, many clubs pay statisticians vast sums of money to (hopefully) give them an advantage when it comes to the transfer market or analysis of player performance.

Michael Lewis' 2003 book *Moneyball*, which showed how analytics transformed baseball, initially inspired some football chiefs to abandon 'gut instinct' and gravitate towards a more enlightened player recruitment model. Suspicion remained, though, and some stories in *Expected Goals* reflect this: Hendrik Almstadt's advice to Arsenal to buy the young Kevin De Bruyne fell on deaf ears.

But Liverpool's Champions League and Premier League glory under Jurgen Klopp was helped by the cutting edge approach deployed by their 'transfer committee', which pitched for Roberto Firmino's arrival in 2015. Clubs 'doing' a Moneyball (finding underrated players) include Brighton, who place stock in a stats-based approach to the game, thanks to owner Tony Bloom.

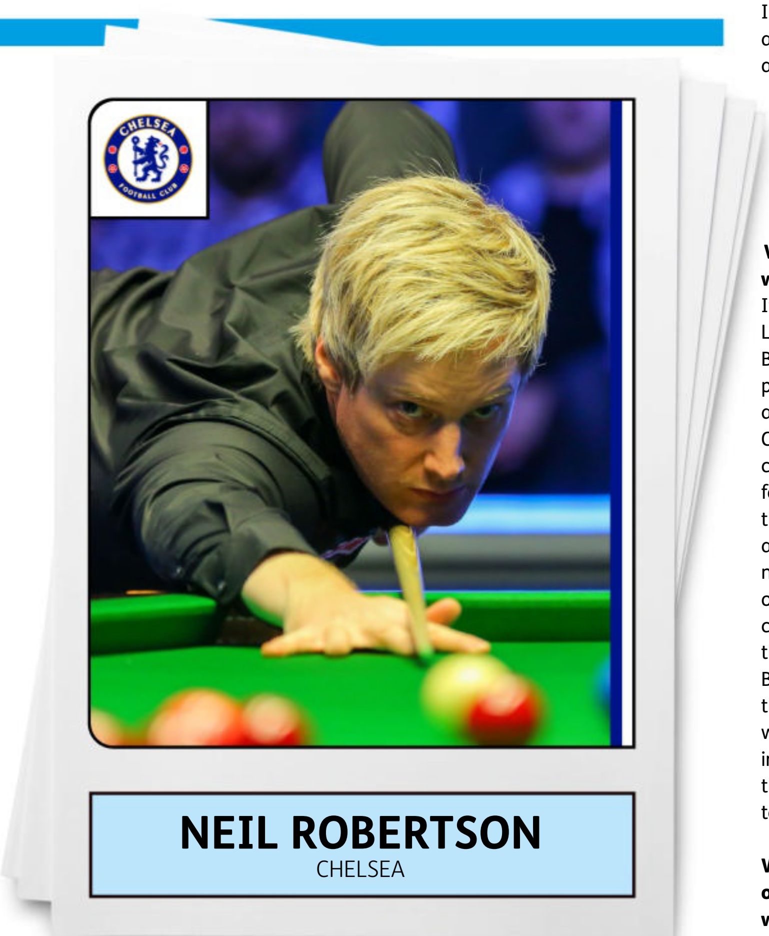
A fresh and very entertaining insight into the oft-fascinating world of football and data.

Jon Spurling

278 **DOMINANT** By early April this season, Barcelona's female C team had won all 22 of their fixtures in the league, scoring 278 goals and conceding none

MY FOOTBALL

The Aussie snooker ace explains why John Terry asked him for help to beat Spurs



NEIL ROBERTSON
CHELSEA

What's the first game you attended?
A 2-0 win for Chelsea over Aston Villa in the Premier League in 2008, when Chelsea were on a crazy run of games without losing at home. Joe Cole and Nicolas Anelka both scored in the first half, and I remember Frank Lampard playing out of his skin. After that, I was a good luck charm at Stamford Bridge. My record was ridiculous – something like 22 wins and one draw.

What do you like most about going to a match?
Nothing beats coming off the train at Fulham Broadway station and seeing all the supporters walking towards the stadium. I love the buzz, the police on horses, the stands selling programmes and the smell in the air. Also, I always like to get to the ground early to watch the warm-ups, like going to the cinema early for the previews!

Who was your biggest hero?
It feels funny saying 'hero', as these guys would have been a similar age to me, but I guess it's a collective of that spine from the 2004-05 title-winning team: Petr Cech, John Terry, Frank Lampard and Didier Drogba. That side was unbelievable. I was heavily inspired by Eidur Gudjohnsen and Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink – that team of around 2001 was why I grew attached to Chelsea – but if I had to pick one player, it would be Terry.

Which Chelsea player, past or present, would have made the best snooker player?
Terry, without a doubt. He took a frame of nine-ball pool off me at Cobham. I was invited down for the day and we had a game – I broke and he cleaned up without missing a shot! Apparently he'd always win the pool competitions at the club. We've stayed good friends since. Before the 'Battle of the Bridge' game between Chelsea and Spurs in 2016, he even texted me and asked me to go, as he knew I was on this lucky streak of home matches and couldn't bear the thought of Spurs winning the title! He's superstitious. Sadly I couldn't go, though it turned out that I wasn't needed in the end.

Have other Chelsea players kept in contact?
A lot of the lads seemed to like snooker – Thibaut Courtois and Paulo Ferreira as well. My son is a goalkeeper, and Courtois has been great at texting and giving him pieces of advice.

Who from your club's past would you bring back to thrive in the current side?
I know Chelsea have got so many attacking options right now, but watching Eden Hazard beat defenders was just ridiculous – he was unplayable on his day. A prime Hazard could win you the match on his own, and he often did.

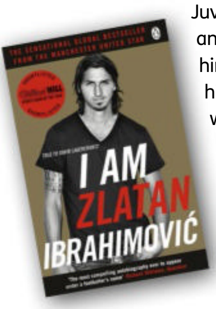
Which player did or do you admire even though they never featured for your club?
I'll avoid saying the obvious answer of Lionel Messi and pick Zinedine Zidane. Unfortunately I never watched him live, but he was magic.

What's been your finest moment as a footballer yourself?
I was at the Shanghai Masters in 2009 and we were given permission to have a kickabout at the Shanghai Stadium, as our hotel overlooked it. Someone crossed the ball to me, I volleyed it first time on my left foot and it flew into the net. That was a pretty cool moment for me.

Where's the best place you've ever watched a football match?
I'd have to say Chelsea's Champions League semi-final second leg against Barcelona in 2011-12. I was sat in the players' lounge at the Crucible, having already finished my game in the World Championship, so I was able to fully concentrate on Chelsea. Those final few minutes were so nerve-wracking that I had to take myself to the toilet and put my fingers in my ears. I gave myself a moment and then heard one of the media guys running down the corridor shouting, "They've scored, they've scored!" I assumed he meant Barça, but no – Chelsea! I burst through the doors into the media centre and went wild, screaming. They heard me inside the arena – I think someone in the crowd got blamed and was asked to be quiet...

What's the most important piece of memorabilia that you have or wish you still had?
The day I went to Cobham, Chelsea handed me a shirt with 'Robertson' on the back and all of the lads signed it, which was really cool. That now hangs proudly in my games room. I also have one from the title-winning Blues team in 2014-15, which I love.

What's your favourite football book?
I enjoyed reading Zlatan Ibrahimovic's autobiography. He speaks a lot about not being a good finisher at Ajax and Juventus early on in his career, and how Fabio Capello made him spends hours practising his shooting after training. He was also given an ultimatum by his agent, Mino Raiola, that he wouldn't earn a big move if his finishing didn't rapidly improve.



> “JOHN TERRY BEAT ME AT POOL ONCE. I BROKE AND HE CLEANED UP WITHOUT MISSING A SINGLE SHOT”

Who’s your current favourite player?
At the moment, it’s got to be Thiago Silva. What he’s been doing at 38 years old is crazy. He’s holding everything together at the back and never looks like he breaks a sweat.

What’s the greatest goal you’ve ever seen live?
I was at Stamford Bridge when Charlie Adam scored for Stoke from inside his own half. On TV it seems like the ball moves quicker than when you’re there watching live – I remember how slowly the ball travelled through the air. It all happened in slow motion.

What do you think the footballing equivalent of making a 147 break is?
That’s a hard one, as it’s such a unique thing. A perfect hat-trick, I suppose, in a really important game? Or maybe an amazing solo effort, like Hazard’s goal against Arsenal in 2017.

Do you think Australia will ever win the men’s World Cup?
Yikes, not for a while, if at all, although we’ve certainly got the personality in Australia to continue overperforming at tournaments. We lack the world-class players we had around 2006; there are fewer Australian players in the Premier League now. Maybe it has something to do with the growth of the A-League.

What’s the funniest thing you’ve ever seen at a game?
Watching Jose Mourinho gallop down the touchline to join the pile-on after Demba Ba scored the winner against PSG in the 2013-14 Champions League. I’m not sure there are many managers who’d be seen doing that. I think he tried to convince journalists afterwards that he only sprinted over there to give his players tactical instructions!
Lewis Watson

FOOTBALL’S RICHEST PLAYER?

No, not Messi or Ronaldo: the man in question now plays in Thailand

On the face of it, Chonburi seem an unremarkable club, spending most of their time bobbing about in mid-table in Thailand’s top flight. But for the past two seasons, they’ve reportedly had the world’s richest footballer on their books.

While Lionel Messi’s net worth is about £500 million and Cristiano Ronaldo a paltry £400m, Chonburi midfielder Faiq Bolkiah has been described as being worth closer to £16bn. How? Well, he’s the nephew of the Sultan of Brunei, one of the globe’s wealthiest royals.

Bolkiah was actually born in LA, before relocating to England – he was educated at Bradfield College in Berkshire, beginning his football career with the mighty Woolton Hill Argyle, then moving on to AFC Newbury as a junior. “He became a fantastic goalscorer with amazing pace,” said former coach Paul Morgan.

In 2009, he was snapped up by Southampton’s academy – sadly, the winger didn’t become the next Gareth Bale, heading off for trials with Reading and Arsenal, prior to joining Chelsea aged 16. There, he featured for the under-18s and received advice from boss Jose Mourinho. “When our youth team played the senior team, he pointed out that sometimes I’d be in the wrong position,” said Bolkiah.

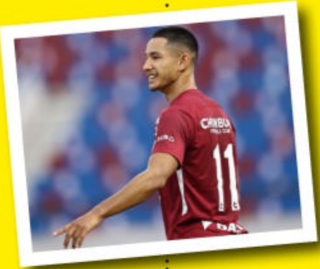
He soon switched position all the way to Leicester, signing a three-year pro deal via a trial at Stoke – his family were known to be friends of the Foxes’ Thai owners and the British royal family.

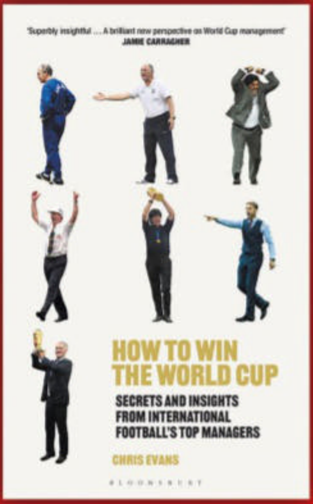
He appeared for the Premier League outfit in the UEFA Youth League, made six appearances for the Brunei national team and even penned a one-year contract extension at the King Power Stadium, keeping him there until 2020, but departed to Portuguese side Maritimo without getting near the Leicester first team.

“I had three or four offers,” he later revealed. “Maritimo told me, ‘Come here, you’ll play’, but that didn’t happen. I feel like there were a lot of politics to do with why Maritimo wanted me.”

Instead he joined Chonburi in Thai League One, the country’s top division (to be fair, it makes more sense than England’s League One being the third tier). Regular games finally came as his new club finished seventh last term – he netted his first goals this season, putting Chonburi… seventh again.

Said to be on modest wages, don’t expect him to emulate Messi and Ronaldo on the field any time soon. Is he, however, the only former Woolton Hill Argyle junior ever to line up for the Brunei national team? Er, yes, he probably is…

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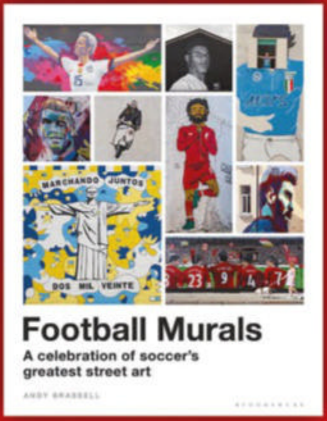
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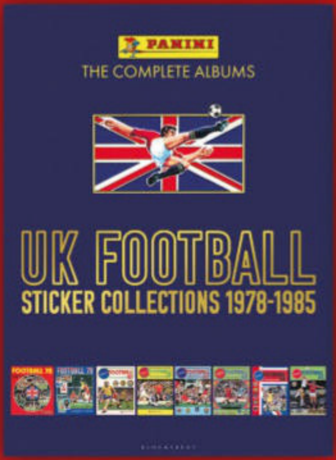
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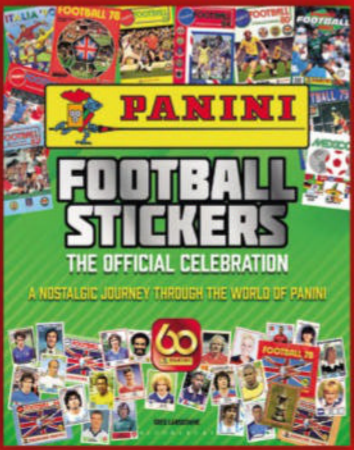
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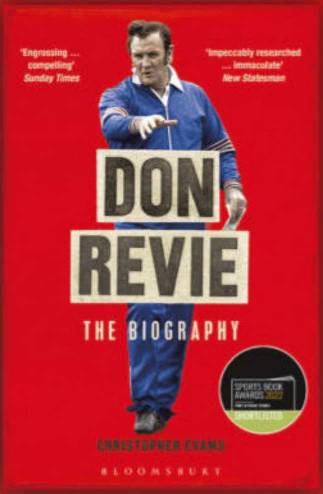
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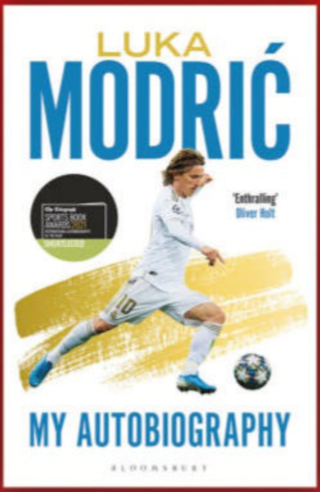
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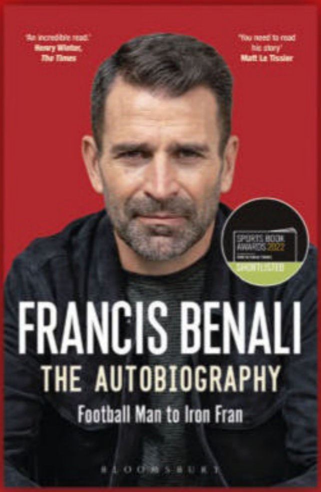
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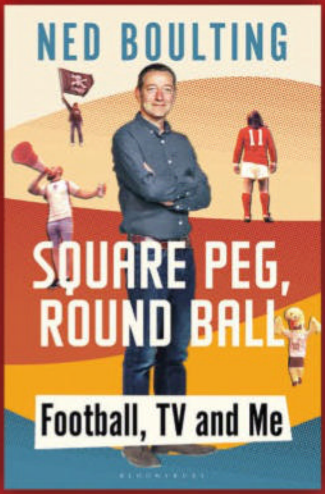
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OPINION

The presenter and journalist gives her take on the beautiful game – this month: Solly key for Seagulls

The Brighton conveyor belt of talent continues to unearth gems, with players like 18-year-old striker Evan Ferguson, Japan star Kaoru Mitoma, midfielder Moises Caicedo and World Cup winner Alexis Mac Allister often grabbing the headlines. But since Roberto de Zerbi's arrival as manager, there's also been a significant upturn in performances across the squad, none more evident than in local lad Solly March.

Brighton started this Premier League season on a high, and despite losing their head coach, assistant head coach, first-team coach, goalkeeping coach, 2021-22 player of the season, head of recruitment and assistant head of recruitment to Chelsea in September, the Seagulls have still managed to surpass expectations. In the aftermath of the west Londoners' raid, a sense of calm remained at the seaside, thanks to the stability provided by Albion fan and owner, Tony Bloom.

He's proven on numerous occasions after key departures that a succession plan is always in place. So, when the appointment of ex-Sassuolo supremo De Zerbi was announced, there was a buzz and intrigue to find out what he could bring, and whether he could kick the club on from the promising position Graham Potter left them in.

The Italian was an instant hit. While he failed to win any of his opening five games, his exuberant personality, risk and reward tactics on the pitch and unrelenting confidence that Brighton shouldn't fear any team was a breath of fresh air. That has rubbed off on the players and March has emerged as one of De Zerbi's standout performers. The 28-year-old wideman has spent his entire professional career at Albion, but he's never looked happier or played with such consistent quality before. It's his best ever scoring season, with all of his goals coming after the World Cup once he'd had more time to adapt to the incoming coach.

De Zerbi spotted the talent in March right from the get-go, describing him in a press conference as one of his "very big players". March is equally as fond of his new gaffer, saying he's the best he's ever worked with. As well as being given that vote of confidence from the manager, a major part of March's rise has been his conversion to first choice right-winger. Prior to De Zerbi's arrival, March predominantly played as a left-wing-back – by deploying him further forward, he's encouraged to get into the penalty area and shoot more, and it's clearly getting the best out of him. His recent success has seen Albion tie him down to a long-term contract that could keep him at the Amex until 2027.

As Roberto's revival gathers pace, the Seagulls look to make history and seal European qualification for the first time, and there's no doubt March will have a huge role to play. Sussex-born Solly may have gone under the radar before, but this diamond in the rough is now shining bright.

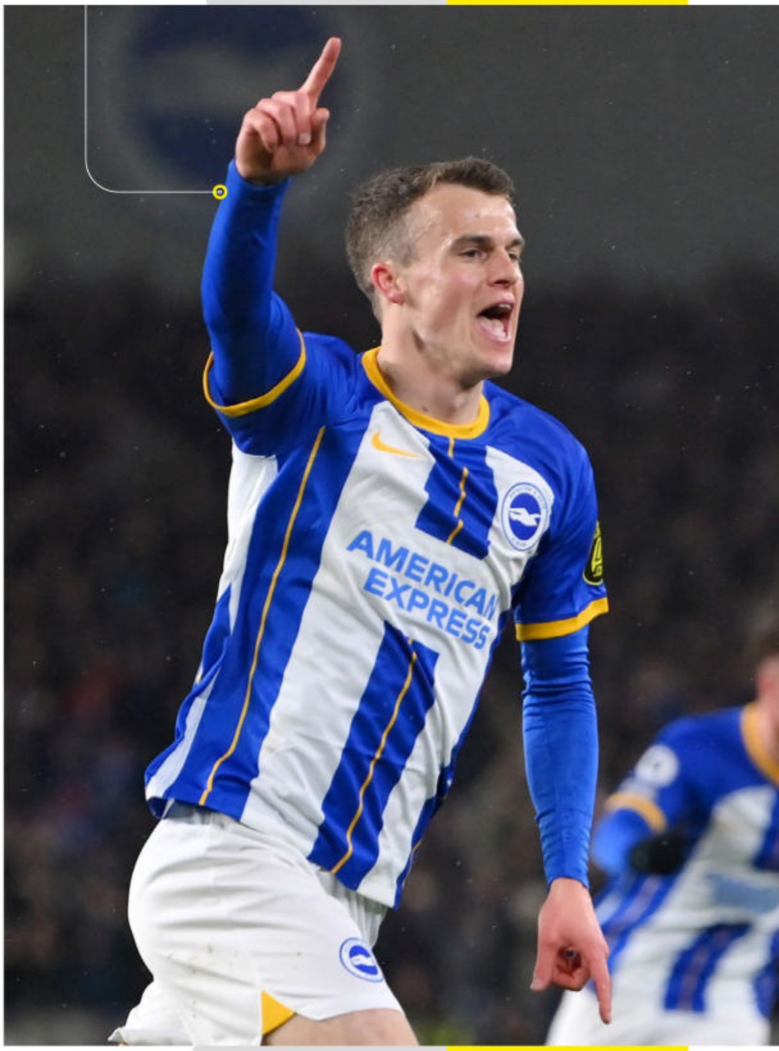
CHUBA IS A BORO BOY

Whatever Michael Carrick has done to get Chuba Akpom firing has worked wonders. The forward [below] is the top scorer in the Championship, with all but four of his goals notched since the ex-Manchester United midfielder took over at the Riverside Stadium. Akpom had never hit double figures in a league season before, making this by far the best campaign of his life, and he's not even playing as an out and out striker. Starting his career at Arsenal, and after various loan spells including in Belgium and Greece, he's finally found his shooting boots in the North East, becoming the first Boro player to smash 25 league goals in a season in 52 years. They were 21st when Carrick came in – now, after Akpom's prolific exploits, they're on the brink of playing Premier League football once again.

STOCKPORT ON THE RISE

After an 11-year absence, Stockport made it back to the Football League last summer and were hotly tipped to bounce straight up to League One following strong summer recruitment. However, it was a shaky start for Dave Challinor's side, who won just two of their opening 11 league games to cool talk of back-to-back promotions. Since then, the Hatters have rarely lost (five defeats in their next 30 league games), and those lofty pre-season predictions look very much on.

> "SOLLY'S SPENT HIS ENTIRE CAREER WITH ALBION, BUT HE'S NEVER LOOKED HAPPIER OR BEEN THIS CONSISTENT"



INTERVIEW

SYLVINHO

The ex-Arsenal full-back became Albania boss at the start of January, and the Brazilian is aiming to bag a spot at Euro 2024

After spells in charge of Lyon and Corinthians, how did you become manager of Albania?
I'd returned from Sao Paulo to my home in Porto and been on the market for almost a year when I decided to travel to Milan, where I previously lived for five years. Out of nowhere, while in town, I received an invitation to go for a dinner with the president of the Albanian FA. I said to myself, 'Why not?' They were looking for a coach, wanted to get to know me and hear my ideas. It was a great conversation and I was very excited about what they told me – they were unveiling a new training complex, had a great generation of players and dreamed high. So I decided to accept the offer. I'd already worked with the Brazilian national team as an assistant for three and a half years, so it made sense for me. It wasn't like I'd get there and ask myself, 'What do I do now?' or 'Where do I start?' I already knew the answer to those questions.

Do you still live in Porto?
No, it was crystal clear from the very beginning that for this to work, I'd move to Tirana. I needed to experience their routine, to meet people out in the streets. Now I'm living in a hotel that's just 2.5km from the FA building, so sometimes I walk back home. Can you imagine another national team coach doing the same? It's a beautiful place made up of people who welcome you in the best possible way.

You have two other former Premier League players, Pablo Zabaleta and Doriva, as assistants. How did they get involved with the project?
Doriva has been working with me for some time now and is also staying in Tirana. We played at Celta Vigo and often travelled with our families to Porto in the early 2000s, so we go back a very long way. He'd already started a coaching career when I invited him to be my assistant. For Zaba, this is his first experience in this type of role – we met at Manchester City and remained in touch. We used to speak a lot about football and watch some games together in Barcelona, where he lives. It was a no-brainer.

What has the experience been like for you in Albania so far?
There's so much potential here that's yet to be discovered. To ensure that we had a team that reflected that, we had to dive in from day one. That meant watching 240 games to get to an initial list of 70 footballers, then a pre-list of 39 and finally the 23 that we took to our first match against Poland in the Euro 2024 qualifiers. As part of the process, Doriva, Zaba and I visited most of the players, travelling to countries like Italy, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland and England. We have a lot of young players who were born abroad like Anis Mehmeti, who's moved from Wycombe to Bristol City this season – he's one of the new faces we've brought into the squad. Playing Poland straight away wasn't easy but, despite losing 1-0 away, I was very happy with what I saw. We didn't let them control the game, and even had a last-minute chance to equalise and bring home a point.

Is there any language barrier between you and the players?
That was actually one of the things that surprised me the most, because I didn't know how it would work, but around 80 per cent of the meetings are in Italian. They're already used to that as three of their former coaches were Italians, so besides the press conferences, there's been no situation in which we have needed a translator. I lived in Milan so I can speak Italian. Doriva played for Sampdoria and Zabaleta is also familiar with the language. Whenever we need it, we also make use of English, too.

What are your aims with Albania?
If you ask me if it's a dream to qualify for the Euros, it obviously is. Albania

NOT SO FRIENDLY Bournemouth's under-18s welcomed Garuda Select from Indonesia for a friendly match – only for the game to descend into not one but three brawls...

> “WE'LL FIGHT FOR EACH POINT – THIS IS OUR DEPARTURE POINT, NOT THE ARRIVAL POINT”

already achieved it in 2016 and it was an extraordinary moment for the entire country. Back then, the number of eligible players to choose from was bigger, though, as Albania and Kosovo players were still part of the same team. But I believe we have a very good generation that can guide Albania back again. It will be difficult and we'll have to fight for every point in our seven remaining games. But as a good friend of mine says, this is the departure point for us, not the arrival point. We're only getting started.

What are your future ambitions – is returning to a dugout in English football a dream for you?
What can I tell you? Every manager wants to work in the Premier League one day – they all want to have the chance of experiencing it, or even the Championship. It's not difficult to understand why. The organisation has improved a lot over the years and you can only describe it as extraordinary. The same has happened to the level of football as well. When I first joined Arsenal in 1999, it was all about long passes – you'd only see the ball flying over your head, never rolling on the ground. It was already different when Zaba arrived at Manchester City nearly a decade later. I was watching a game between Brighton and Brentford a few weeks ago, and football doesn't get much better than that. It was a game between Brighton and Brentford, which is the biggest sign of how far English football has come.

You worked with Arsenal's sporting director Edu when you were part of the backroom staff for the Brazilian national team. Are you surprised by his success in north London?
Not at all. I'm in touch with Edu – he's one of the few people in football I trust for advice. We're friends and he even invited me to watch a match in London. It had been a while since I last went to the Emirates, so it was great to feel the love from the fans again. I also had the chance to meet David Seaman, Tony Adams and Martin Keown, all of whom I hadn't seen in ages. It all started for me at Arsenal – that's where I learned how to defend and to fully understand the game. I can only be grateful for the chance to have worked with Arsene Wenger. Now it's a joy to turn on the television and watch the team play.
Marcus Alves

BALKAN ADVENTURE

The febrile footballing peninsula has hosted plenty of big-name coaches in the past decade and a bit...

LOTHAR MATTHAUS

The German had already managed Rapid Vienna, Partizan Belgrade and the Hungarian national team when he took charge of Bulgaria in 2010. His first game was a 1-0 win in Wales in qualifying for Euro 2012, but he'd get only four more competitive matches, sacked after a 3-1 loss in Switzerland.

JOHN TOSHACK

Tosh's managerial career took him to Portugal, Spain, Turkey, France, Italy, Azerbaijan, Morocco and Iran, via an equally random spell as the boss of Macedonia. Appointed in August 2011, he won only one of eight games, then departed after refusing to relocate to the former Yugoslav republic. Meanie.

DICK ADVOCAAT

The nomadic Dutchman's 2014 arrival in Serbia didn't go well. After drawing with Armenia in a Euro 2016 qualifier, their home game against Albania saw the visitors awarded a 3-0 win, when a brawl halted the match. Serbia then lost to Denmark, as Advocaat lasted just four months.

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When Hugo Sanchez was top scorer in La Liga [1989-90], all 38 goals were scored with his first touch.
Dan Thomas

Ireland have made the knockout stages of all three World Cups they've played in, but have only won two matches at the tournament.
Jerry Higgins

Wycombe are the only club with a 100 per cent record against Manchester City in league games.
Dave Mayor Jnr

Northampton remain the fastest team to go from the fourth tier to the top flight and back again, leaving Division Four in 1961, returning in '69.
@ShirtQuest

Since Mo Salah joined Liverpool, he has more bookings for celebrating goals against Man United at Anfield than United have goals at Anfield.
Dave Stott

On the same day in 1885 that Arbroath set the world record score of 36-0, Dundee Harp won 35-0.
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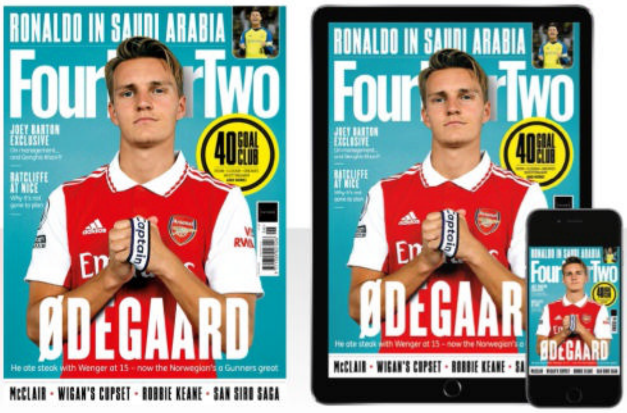
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Martin Ødegaard was just 15 when he first trained with Arsenal. Now, at 24, he's finally their captain. *FourFourTwo* speaks to those who were there for this coming-of-age story, as the Norwegian star survived the chaos of the Bernabeu and found a home in London

Words Mark White

NDERKID

Arsene Wenger offered to take Martin Ødegaard out for dinner. His treat. Martin ordered the steak.

This was December 2014, more than six years before Ødegaard moved to north London, when it would be Mikel Arteta tempting him to Arsenal in an entirely different era. Wenger was planting the seed of a tree whose shade he would never get to enjoy personally.

On that night long ago, three people, the future unknown to them, sat around a candlelit table and discussed football, development and values: the Arsenal manager, a teenage Ødegaard and his father. Hans-Erik had been a reliable, uncapped midfielder in the 1990s for Stromsgodset in Norway, but now the biggest clubs in Europe were lining up to lay gifts of gravity and light at his family's feet – not because of his own talents, but because his son was already the jewel of the Norwegian game. Martin wasn't even old enough to order a glass of wine with dinner.

Wenger spoke of the pathway Martin would take at Arsenal's leafy London Colney base, where the tyro had enjoyed a training session that afternoon, but also how he could develop as a person ►

under his tutelage. He would learn to cook. He'd visit local hospitals. He'd contribute to the community. It was as if Arsenal's boss was already assembling the next leader of this football club.

He'd eventually get there, of course – the long way round – because Wenger was often right about the direction that a young player's career would take. At the time, a 15-year-old Ødegaard sat, wide-eyed, feeling ever more painfully self-conscious. Playmakers tend to be hyper-aware, after all.

"It's Arsene Wenger, you know?" he said of the odd dinner date years later. "I was so nervous. I was just sitting there thinking, 'Is he analysing me now? Is he going to judge me if I eat the fries?'"

A PRINCE WITH NO PRECEDENT

"I got to know about Martin Ødegaard via the Norwegian press," says Norwegian football journalist Thore Haugstad. "Everybody began writing about this kid who was scoring loads of goals and playing with adults. You saw clips of him pirouetting in games, the great goals he was scoring, and you realised... this is not normal."

Especially in Norway. The national team of this sleepy, icy landscape, with a population of just over five million, last played at a men's World Cup only months before Martin was born, in 1998. Rather like Erling Haaland, his junior by only a year and a half, Ødegaard owed his development not to the streets and the system but to his father's own steel will, which he would develop in turn.

Hans-Erik Ødegaard invested money in an artificial pitch, carefully coaching his son's talents like a conductor overseeing a pianist. Ødegaard Jr spent his childhood honing his swivel and sparkle. However, not even Hans-Erik could have pictured quite how steep this journey's ascent would be.

"I first met Martin when he was 11 and he joined Stromsgodset, the team his father played for," says Iver Fossum, a midfielder and Norway international who now plays for AaB Aalborg in Denmark. "I was 13. Normally at that age, two years' difference between kids is a lot, but not for him. He was exactly then as he is now: calm and not saying much. He just played football."

And boy, could the boy play. Aged 12, he had been the headline act at an under-16s tournament with rivals who had four years' more muscle. By 13 he had trained with the Stromsgodset first team, and at 14 he was playing senior football. Aged 15 years and 253 days, he made his international debut. His race to the top was scarcely believable. So young was he, the makers of *Football Manager* had to ask his father's permission to include him in their game.

"We came up to the first team at the same time," Fossum tells *FFT*. "In training, he was a small boy dribbling around guys twice his age and twice the size. He made his league debut at 15 and got an assist. We could all see he was going to be unbelievable."

Soon after, everybody in his home city of Drammen knew Martin Ødegaard's name. YouTube clips surfaced of this midfield wizard dropping defenders with a shimmy of his shoulders. He looked more than world-class: in a social media age, he looked marketable. This could be a Scandinavian superstar with swagger, grounded by that very Norwegian brand of modesty.

"He'd been on a pedestal around Europe," explains Graham Hunter, the Spain-based football journalist. "There were two standout footballers at youth tournaments: Christian Pulisic and Martin Ødegaard. Both of them had prominent fathers who were involved in their representation. It was clear that these were two crown princes."

But these youth football festivals were secondary to the Ødegaards' own European tour, as the gods of club football pitched their projects to the family. In a parallel universe, he might have signed for Liverpool.

"He actually grew up as a huge Liverpool fan," says Hunter, "so Liverpool pushed the boat out to try to get him. They got Steven Gerrard to show him around the Melwood training complex, as it was at the time. They put a big effort into convincing him that this was the right environment, playing on how long he'd been a supporter."

Above A Norway international aged 15, Ødegaard had a teenage fanclub **Below** He has since said that he regrets turning up at Real Madrid looking like a right old scruff

A STAR AT 15, HE LOOKED MORE THAN WORLD-CLASS: HE LOOKED MARKETABLE

Above He would play for Castilla but train among the Real Madrid first team – with no little friction

Instead, Martin and his father realised Real Madrid were the option for them while watching Los Blancos on TV. They phoned Madrid there and then to accept the offer.

Liverpool were disconsolate, given how strongly they had campaigned. Wenger, too, filed Ødegaard – with whom he'd had that dinner just a month earlier – in his 'ones that got away' scrapbook alongside Lionel Messi, Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Cristiano Ronaldo. The boy-wonder from Drammen was going to play for arguably the greatest playmaker of all time: Zinedine Zidane, coach of Real Madrid Castilla, the club's reserve team.

It was as poetic as his playing style. But this was not the same Real Madrid for whom Zidane had cavorted across the turf. They had recently revolutionised their entire transfer policy, to spite their most bitter foes.

"The context around Madrid is important when talking about the move," Hunter tells *FFT*. Two years before it, in 2013, the club had a 21-year-old Neymar within their grasp, only for Barcelona to snatch the Santos superstar. At a club that doesn't taste defeat often, Real Madrid president Florentino Perez found the sting unbearable. Hunter continues: "He told his scouting team, 'Get me as many of the world's biggest young talents as possible, so we can stick it up Barcelona's nose – if there is another Neymar, I want the next six of them'." Ødegaard was one of the lucky few.

Fossum recalls, "It was the biggest club in the world and we thought it was the perfect step. He was only 15 and everyone thought he was well on course to become Norway's greatest-ever player."

Heritage is heavy. Perez had pivoted 180 degrees from Galacticos to prodigies, and wonderkids were not allowed to fly under the radar any more. Ødegaard, like all good superstars, arrived to the paparazzi's adoring chatter an hour late – but there wasn't much fashionable about his jumper and unwashed mop of blond hair. He has since spoken of cringing now at how unprepared he was for the press conference where he was unveiled as Madrid's next top model.

"It was really unusual," reflects Haugstad. "I'd moved to Madrid three months before Ødegaard, and I remember the Norwegian press were trying to put into words what this meant. It was really difficult: there was no precedent at all. The top foreigners we'd had were Tore Andre Flo at Chelsea, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer at Manchester United, and that was it. We hadn't had anything like this before."

Looking rather casual before the flashlights next to a besuited Emilio Butragueno, the club legend who'd segued from Real Madrid player to director of football to head of PR, Ødegaard gasped, "It's unbelievable and it's incredible – I'm ready for the best club in the world." Others thought him far from ready.

"When Ødegaard signed, the stats will tell you that he principally played for Castilla," explains Hunter. "But Florentino wanted him involved in the first-team squad. Carlo Ancelotti, the manager at the time, said no."

And so the teenager was stuck between the youth setup and the first team, as senior figures at the Bernabeu played tug of war. In February 2015, Real Madrid's new star made his bow for the reserves in a friendly against Beijing Guoan, and glittered on the ball. The next thing he knew, he was included in the Champions League squad: not quite the slow progress some had expected. The mixed messages continued. Two months after his arrival, and following sporadic bursts off the bench for Castilla, Ødegaard was publicly dropped by Zidane, as the reserve-team boss found it hard to work with a player who was training with the senior team. The language barrier was also blamed.

"Ødegaard said himself that he stagnated a bit, and it's very easy to see why," says Haugstad. "Castilla were playing in the third division, grouped together with the Basque teams, who are really strong and physical. A lot of the pitches were bad and there were many rumours about him not fitting in and just playing for himself. He was a kid at the time – this was harsh."

Spanish outlet *Diario AS* reported jealousy from other youngsters regarding Ødegaard's reported £80,000-a-week wage. The reserve squad had become imbalanced as a result, *AS* said, and he had rejected requests to train with them more than his contract stated he could. Weeks later, they gave him a mark of 0/10 for his performance in a Castilla match, in which his team had clawed back an equaliser after he had been substituted. Objectively, Ødegaard's performance had not been that bad, but the die was cast.

"Having Zidane as my coach was a very nice thing, but it wasn't particularly good for my self-confidence," Ødegaard admitted in a 2019 interview with Norwegian publication *AD*. Eventually, Carlo Ancelotti would label the transfer a "PR move" by Perez. "He could be the best player in the world; I don't care, because he was not a player I asked for," the Italian snarled after departing as manager.

Ødegaard was a player caught between two ideologies: the president wanting to integrate the jewel of the club's next great era, and the manager pushing a boulder up a hill in the present day.

"They'd been on this winning run off the back of clinching the Champions League in ▸

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Lisbon, then they lost to Valencia in January," says Hunter, of the month that Ødegaard arrived. "There was a pretty humiliating 4-0 defeat to Atletico Madrid at the Calderon a month later, and in that context he wasn't in a position to convince Ancelotti – who was about to lose his job – that he was ready to be a part of the first-team squad.

"I felt sorry for him. His Madrid career didn't take shape in that first spell. He was ignored."

DUTCH COURAGE

In January 2017, a couple of years after the Norwegian had landed in Madrid, Dutch club Heerenveen confirmed that Ødegaard would join them on loan for 18 months. It was an iceberg to the hull of Perez's ego, after he had pushed for the teenager to be slotted in alongside the elite. But if the player's image had taken a hit, too, that news didn't reach his new team-mates in the Netherlands.

"At Heerenveen, we were all so excited for him to arrive," striker Reza Ghoochannejhad tells *FFT* today. "A Real Madrid player, one of the biggest talents in Europe at that time, coming to *our* club – it felt like a big win for everyone. He'd get time to adapt to senior football and develop, while we would have this great talent in our team."

Some mulled if this was the kind of move he should have made all along.

"There was plenty of debate in Norway about whether he had picked the right club – it still continues today," reveals Haugstad. "Some said, 'This is Real Madrid: he can train with Cristiano Ronaldo, Zinedine Zidane is in charge of Real Madrid Castilla, and you have to jump at that chance'. But it was a really charged debate. A lot of people thought he should have moved to somewhere like Ajax, where he could have developed and got into the first team quickly."

Those championing the Eredivisie got their wish, and Ødegaard began the long game of coming good on his potential. He made his debut with a blink-and-you'll-miss-it cameo in a 2-0 victory over ADO Den Haag, touching the ball only once, and when microphones were pointed under his nose afterwards, he gingerly played down personal expectations in order to talk more about the team. His first seven games in blue and white yielded one assist and a single shot. He looked bruised.

Finding confidence took time. It was clear that this 18-year-old had ability you couldn't bottle, but he wasn't yet the Ødegaard who would later captain club and country.

"He was a very good footballer on the field, but if you'd asked the dressing room if he would have been a future Arsenal captain, I'd have said no," confesses Ghoochannejhad. "I think most of the players would agree. As a personality, he was a very calm guy who didn't say much – and that's not a negative thing. It's just the way he was at that time.

"He really understood the game, though. If the manager asked him for his opinion, he always had something to say."

Game by game, he found his groove, and a stunning 25-yard smash against Ajax helped to remind everyone what this boy had in his locker. In the quieter moments, Ødegaard learned how to dictate play. And importantly, after the Castilla drama, he got on with his team-mates: rumours surfaced that Heerenveen had to pay a fee every time they didn't start their Galactico loanee, but the Heerenveen squad wouldn't have cared.

"The terms of his contract really didn't come up," says Ghoochannejhad. "If you're as skilful and as comfortable on the ball as Martin was, no one is going to ask questions as to why he's picked.

"It was so easy for him; he was a natural. But we didn't use him in the correct way at Heerenveen. He was playing as a right winger, often coming off the bench, while adapting to a new country and a new style of football. He was such a hard worker."

Below Making baby steps at Heerenveen

"IF REAL MADRID COULD TOSS ASIDE A PLAYER LIKE ØDEGAARD, WHAT ARE THEIR STANDARDS?"

The following season, Ødegaard headed back to the Eredivisie, this time with Vitesse. Again, he buckled down. For such a delicate footballer, it was as if he felt that he wanted to grind out his potential.

"He always wanted to go a bit further than anyone else – he'd even take an exercise bike into the sauna," chuckles Navarone Foor, a team-mate at Vitesse. "He'd be in the gym doing crazy stuff, attaching weights to his wrists when he was running. We were always laughing, asking what the hell he was doing."

Vitesse resembled a better fit stylistically and culturally. The Arnhem outfit were a bus stop of a club, containing Chelsea loanees and Dutch talents who would inevitably move on to bigger and better things, so what was one more wonderkid? Former CSKA Moscow, Russia and Hull City manager Leonid Slutsky was in charge and more than willing to put an arm around Ødegaard, rather than offer a frosty shoulder as Zidane and Ancelotti had done. The young midfielder's displays continued to improve. Ironically, the game in which his team-mates saw him truly come of age wasn't in the Europa League nor a high-profile Eredivisie clash.

Below Vitesse saw Ødegaard become more influential as a player and as a squad member

"I remember we played Kozakken Boys in the cup just before Christmas," Foor tells *FFT*. "It isn't always easy to play against amateur teams as they give more than a thousand per cent in their big moment. Even now, an amateur team, Spakenburg, is in the semi-finals of the Dutch Cup this year [they went on to lose 2-1 to PSV]. It's the same here as it is in the FA Cup.

"We were doing everything possible to win this game and needed that quality. Martin stepped up to score in the very last minute. It was a tough, tough match, but he was there. He became a leader with his actions."

In that 2018-19 campaign, a crossroads season in which the precocious playmaker could have skyrocketed or stalled, Ødegaard registered 24 goals and assists.

"I think that's the most impressive thing about him: that he has never really wavered in becoming the best that he could be," says Haugstad. "He could so easily have become a lost talent, given how difficult it was. If he didn't have a very rational head, that probably would have happened."

Instead, he soon outgrew the Eredivisie.

"I've always thought of him as being this great gentleman," adds Ghoochannejhad. "He played for Real Madrid, the biggest club in the world, yet he came to Holland and he was very modest. He was so down-to-earth, and open to feedback from all the coaches. That's why he succeeded."

LA REAL DEAL

Like Drammen, San Sebastian is a quiet town on the coastline. It could offer Ødegaard tranquillity and familiarity as he settled into La Liga properly once more.

"The Basque culture is more like Norway," Ødegaard later told *The Players' Tribune*. "People are more reserved on the outside, but once they take you into their hearts, they are so caring and protective. You become one of their own. I loved that."

As the No.10 in a 4-2-3-1, Ødegaard was the centrepiece at Real Sociedad. The loanee had a licence to ad-lib, weaving through defenders with ethereal movement, sliding line-breaking passes like geometric jokes in his pass maps. Against Mallorca, in only his second appearance, he instigated a late counter-attack and with two touches at the other end – one deft, one devastating – he won La Real the game, 1-0. He was La Liga's player of the month for September. It was an invitation for people to sit up and watch.

"At Real Sociedad, he played for a club who wanted him," explains Graham Hunter. "He had a coach, Imanol Alguacil, who was used to working with young players ready to break into the first team. And the brand of football Alguacil wanted to play was very attacking.

"Alguacil knew when to put pressure on youngsters, and when not to do that, and ▸

CURSE OF THE ARMBAND

It's been a rocky road from Arteta to Ødegaard in Arsenal's captaincy quest

ØDEGAARD
Captain
8

2016-18 PER MERTESACKER

The beloved 'BFG' inherited the captaincy from Arteta but only skippered Arsenal in a handful of matches. Poor Per was plagued by injuries and made his first appearance as captain in the 2017 FA Cup Final, of all games. They won, too. These days, he runs the club's academy.

2018-19 LAURENT KOSCIELNY

Next in line, literally, was Mertesacker's fellow centre-back. The Frenchman was promised a move at the end of 2018-19 and, in that leaderly way, went on strike to secure it. In his unveiling at Bordeaux, he took off his Arsenal jersey to reveal his new club's strip underneath, which slightly soured the 350-odd Gunners appearances across nine years of service.

2019: GRANIT XHAKA

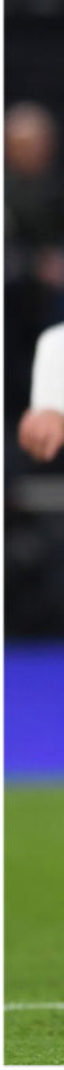
Already unpopular at the time, Xhaka tossed away the captaincy by swearing at fans as they booed him off the pitch in a home draw with Crystal Palace. Brought back from the brink by Arteta, he's been rehabilitated as Ødegaard's midfield pal.

2019-21 PIERRE-EMERICK AUBAMEYANG

An odd choice for captaincy in the eyes of some, Aubameyang was voted second by team-mates in the original vote that saw Xhaka made skipper. Auba also lost the role after a "disciplinary issue" that eventually led to a contract termination.

2021-22 ALEXANDRE LACAZETTE

Lacazette became the short-term fix before Ødegaard was named captain in the summer of 2021. Although he never let Arsenal down with his actions, fans desperately wanted more from a £50m striker who netted four open-play goals in his final campaign. He departed on relatively good terms to return to Lyon.



Clockwise from above left He hit the ground running at Real Sociedad; "Didn't you knock us out of the cup?"; a leader of men at Arsenal; "Mess up and I *will* take that shirt back from you"

he's quite a demanding man. So, Ødegaard was somewhere the supporters loved him, and where he was playing 30-plus games for a team that played very attractive football. There was a blossom of maturity."

Ødegaard had grown, emotionally – for the first time, he told his dad that he wanted to step out and live alone – and also physically. The 20-year-old was ready to conduct the orchestra at the Anoeta.

He ended 2019 with 10 goals and assists in 18 games for Real Sociedad. In the new year, he scored or assisted six times in five Copa del Rey ties to fire the Basques to only the third major final in their history, including a goal that helped to knock out his parent club – a sucker-punch as satisfying as it was controversial in some quarters of the capital. He was ready for a Real Madrid renaissance. With Zidane now in the top job, Ødegaard was recalled in the summer of 2020.

But he would make just three league starts for Real Madrid.

"Madrid is a pitiless, ruthless environment," reflects Hunter. "Look at how brutally Vinicius Jr was treated there. No one was going out to bat for him until he finally took the reins himself and exploded."

Zidane was on a mission to make Madrid prettier to watch. But, like Ancelotti before him, the Frenchman was caught between the present and the future while trying to integrate younger talents.

"Being called back to Madrid and then not getting to play was the last thing he wanted," sighs Haugstad. "I think the most important thing at Real Sociedad wasn't that he was loved, but that he found a place to settle. He was tired of being loaned out all of the time; he wanted to find a home."

The tide had now turned, for both parties. Ødegaard had experienced a few too many knockbacks from his own employers, while Real Madrid were starting to see the young Norwegian as a cashable commodity. In January 2021, a 22-year-old Ødegaard left Madrid for Arsenal, again on loan. He would make the move permanent that summer.

"I think there was a misperception at Real Madrid that Ødegaard didn't have the character to handle pressure and produce in the biggest moments," says Hunter. "Too many people either weren't paying enough attention to him or lost a little bit of faith."

"We had conversations with Martin at Vitesse about what Zidane and Ronaldo were like," says Navarone Foor. "He told us that the guys at Madrid were just on a different level. If Real Madrid could toss aside a player like Martin Ødegaard, I want to know: what are the standards? If he doesn't get a chance there, I can't imagine how good they are."

"I FEEL AT HOME"

FourFourTwo met Ødegaard at London Colney in August 2022 for a press call, days before he was announced as Arsenal's new captain. After flitting in and out of the line-up in the second half of the 2020-21 campaign, he

BABY GALACTICOS

After losing out on Neymar, Real Madrid decided to snap up a boy wonder or two. Or eleven...

LUCAS SILVA

The day after Ødegaard, Real Madrid signed a 21-year-old Cruzeiro midfielder to great intrigue, yet Silva made only eight first-team appearances. Unable to adapt to European football, either in Madrid or Marseille, he returned to Brazil and now plays for Gremio.

THEO HERNANDEZ

Two years later, in 2017, Real Madrid paid city foes Atletico €24m to release a *Colchonero* born and bred. Like Ødegaard, the left-back had a loan at Real Sociedad, before Paolo Maldini set up a meeting in Ibiza to tempt him to Milan. Madrid sold up at a small loss.

VINICIUS JR

Signed in 2017 to arrive a year later, Vini Jr broke numerous records in joining Madrid, most of them held by Neymar. The learning curve was steep but, helped by Ancelotti and Karim Benzema's Indian summer, a Champions League final winner gave Vini vindication.

RODRYGO

It took €45m to prise Rodrygo from Santos in 2018. As with Vini Jr, he arrived a year later after turning 18, and as with Vini Jr again, it was a slow burn. The Brazilian has had to battle for minutes but came in clutch with key goals in the 2022-23 Champions League.

ANDRIY LUNIN

Real Madrid made Lunin their first ever Ukrainian player when they paid Zorya Luhansk €8.5m for the 19-year-old shot-stopper. After a trio of domestic loans brought very little playing time, he is back on the Bernabeu bench as Thibaut Courtois' understudy.

had, in his sequel season, become one of Mikel Arteta's midfield generals – although the Gunners faltered and finished fifth, losing their Champions League spot to rivals Spurs.

We reminded Ødegaard that he had been in north London for only 18 months and yet, incredibly, Arteta was the longest-serving manager of his entire career. He laughed.

"I moved around a bit too much – maybe not the best thing," Ødegaard replied with a smile. "But I learned a lot from it. I went to Madrid very young; of course, it's hard to play there, so I had to go elsewhere. It wasn't the best situation for me. I wanted stability.

"I have found that here – I'm really happy and I feel at home."

> IN A SIDE FULL OF SPARKLING WONDERKIDS, THEIR CAPTAIN IS ONE OF THE WISER HEADS AT 24

If anyone understood the Norwegian's position, it was Arteta. After progressing through his hometown club, the midfielder joined Barcelona as a highly-regarded teen, fighting for playing time with senior figures. He went on loan abroad, impressing at PSG, yet Barça cashed in on him anyway without offering him the opportunity he craved. The expectation, the confidence and the lack of it: Arteta would have noticed all three, watching Ødegaard's trajectory.

"Be careful with that number," Arteta said as his new signing was pictured holding the No.8 shirt. Of course – it was the same shirt Arteta wore for the Gunners.

Even now, nine years on from making his top-flight bow with Stromsgodset, Ødegaard is finding new layers to his game. In a side full of sparkling wonderkids, their captain is one of the wiser heads. He is still deft and delicious, can still drop a shoulder and thread a pass through the eye of a needle, yet he scans the pitch with older eyes. A Time Lord of a footballer, he has lived so many lives in this game already: the wonderkid, the lost soul and now the captain of the ship. He has evolved as a player; changed as a person. Loans left scars, and that lack of belief in him perhaps cut deeper than we know. He has had to grow up the hard way – and he has arrived, right back where he began, eight and a half years after eating steak with Arsene Wenger. The long way round.

"He has my biggest respect, as a footballer but also as a human being," enthuses Reza Ghoochannejhad. "He's had great personal development. Being captain of Arsenal is about more than just your football ability."

"I watched him play recently during the Euros qualifier between Spain and Norway," Graham Hunter remarks to *FFT*. "He shouted to Alexander Sorloth to mark Nacho. Sorloth didn't react, so Ødegaard ran over to him and shoved him, like, 'Go and f**king do what I told you to!' I thought, 'That is certainly not the Ødegaard that arrived at Madrid' – but it's also not the Ødegaard from Real Sociedad. He has markedly changed."

It's a coming-of-age story unlike many others in football. And there are still plenty of chapters left to run.

"If he was to captain Arsenal to the title in May... seeing a Norwegian lift the Premier League trophy would be so surreal for us," says Thore Haugstad. "The image would last forever in Norway. It has been a rollercoaster but, so far, it has a happy ending." ●

TAKEFUSA KUBO

Kubo was at La Masia before Barcelona were found to have violated international transfer policy; he returned to Japan and Real just couldn't resist. Three years, four Liga loans and zero Madrid appearances later, he left for Real Sociedad (you again?) in 2022, aged 21.

REINIER

A Flamengo No.10 with both style and panache, Reinier was a €30m statement signing in 2020, brought to Europe and dispatched to Dortmund for a two-year loan. It's not quite worked out: he couldn't crack BVB's starting line-up and is now on loan at Girona instead.

EDUARDO CAMAVINGA

At Rennes, Camavinga shone in a victory over PSG when he was just 16, and Real Madrid brought in the Angola-born Frenchman as a long-term investment. The midfielder has impressed in bursts, also filling in at left-back. Still only 20, he's developing superbly.

AURELIEN TCHOUAMENI

Los Blancos paid Monaco an initial €80m for Tchouameni last summer, earmarking him to replace Casemiro, but sped up the transition when the Brazilian joined Manchester United. With Camavinga, too, Madrid and France have their midfield for the next decade.

ENDRICK

Bursting on to the Brazil scene with ridiculous youth stats and a highlight reel retweeted by Gary Lineker, 16-year-old Endrick – who is compared to Romario – ended rumours last December by agreeing to join Real Madrid in 2024. Neymar? Well and truly forgotten here.

SCANDINAVIAN ICONS

Before Martin Ødegaard and Erling Haaland arrived to rip up the Premier League, a host of other Nordic stars had already made their mark on the world stage – these 16 standouts among them

Words Nick Moore, Si Hawkins, Richard Edwards

MICHAEL AND BRIAN LAUDRUP
DENMARK

With due respect to the De Boers, Hazards and, er, Nevilles, there has never been a more talented pair of footballing brethren than the Laudrups. Michael is arguably the greatest Danish player of all time. The attacking midfielder picked up silverware at Ajax, Barcelona, Real Madrid and Juventus. He was an integral cog in Johan Cruyff's Barcelona 'Dream Team', pocketing four La Ligas and the 1992 European Cup. He then crossed the divide to the Bernabeu but somehow remains a legend at both clubs.

Best of all, he did it in style. It's hard to recall a more elegant playmaker: fiercely intelligent, full of feints and blind passes, an assist machine. Italian defender Roberto Galia noted, "I've played against Maradona, Platini and Baggio, but the player I saw do the most indescribable things was Michael."

That might be intimidating for a younger brother, but this was a family made of stern stuff. Brian, four years junior, coasted out of his sibling's shadow – Michael declared he believed Brian to be the better player – but they were both world-class and worshipped.

Brian had abundant technical ability, pace, intelligence and a similar insatiable appetite for assists. He won the Danish Player of the Year award on four occasions (twice as many as Michael), and starred at Bayern Munich, Fiorentina and Rangers, where he scored 44 goals. Danish dynamite indeed.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT The pair never played together at club level, but joined forces for Denmark. Though Michael opted to go on holiday rather than attend Euro 92 (he had to watch his kid brother come home holding the silverware), the duo did collaborate to win the 1995 Confederations Cup, with Brian up front and Michael in midfield.

WEIRDEST MOMENT Michael's rollercoaster stint as manager of Swansea, who he led to the top half of the Premier League and 2013 League Cup Final glory, before being sacked for a supposedly 'laissez faire' attitude to their subsequent poor run.

JOHN ARNE RIISE
NORWAY

The left-back collected a record 110 caps for Norway and became a Liverpool hero during seven seasons at Anfield, after joining from Monaco in 2001. Part of the team that pulled off the fabled Miracle of Istanbul against Milan in 2005 (though he missed a penalty during the shootout), he was the king of the thunderbastard, famously beating Fabien Barthez with one hypersonic strike against Manchester United. In another game against the Red Devils, his shot was so powerful that it dislocated Alan Smith's ankle.

He also scored the fastest goal in League Cup final history, after 45 seconds against Chelsea in Cardiff.

WEIRDEST MOMENT Being on the receiving end of a golf club swung by Craig Bellamy, during a late-night incident in the Algarve.

HANNA LJUNGBERG
SWEDEN

Who's heard of the Swedish city of Umea? If you have, it's probably because of Hanna Ljungberg (no relation to Freddie), the spearhead of Umea IK, a women's football powerhouse in the 2000s: claiming more cups than IKEA's downstairs homeware bit.

Ljungberg helped them become European champions twice – she almost won the 2003 World Cup too, scoring the opener in the final before Germany roared back. 'Skam!', as they say in Umea (that means 'Shame', we're not accusing anyone of match-fixing).

WEIRDEST MOMENT Perugia attempted to sign Ljungberg in 2003 for their men's team. The Serie A upstarts also recruited Colonel Gaddafi's son, but the deal for Ljungberg fell through, they got relegated and haven't been back in the top flight since. ▸

MICHAEL'S RECORD WAS INTIMIDATING, BUT BRIAN COASTED OUT OF HIS OLDER SIBLING'S SHADOW

ADA HEGERBERG
NORWAY

The 2020s have been frustratingly stop-start for the Norwegian super-striker, so far. Just back from a six-month injury lay-off after two years out with cruciate complications – plus a five-year absence from the Norway national team – it's almost as if she's trying to let the mere mortals catch up. Lyon's taliswoman is like that too-good kid who has to be moved up an age group to keep things competitive: it's not fair otherwise.

Actually, Hegerberg did exactly that as a teenager, except she moved straight into first-team football. Already a fixture for her first club Kolbotn at 15, she scored her first hat-trick at 16 and finished that season as top scorer. In 2012 she even bagged five in the first half, against Fart. Blew them away.

The prodigious striker – and younger sister of Andrine, a midfielder – then switched to Germany's Turbine Potsdam. But Ada really took off in France, netting 15 in the 2017-18 Champions League (still a record) during Lyon's treble campaign and winning the first-ever Women's Ballon d'Or (see below).

Hegerberg had already made a dramatic stand against inequality months earlier, refusing to play for Norway until the culture changed, and she isn't universally loved back home. That self-imposed exile ended last year, with a hat-trick against Kosovo.

Injuries remain a serious concern, but at 27 Hegerberg is already the Women's Champions League's all-time top scorer with 59 goals – despite hardly playing for three years. Is the hundred plausible? Whatever happens next, she's got to be in the GOAT race.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT A 16-minute hat-trick in the 2019 Women's Champions League Final takes some topping. Perhaps even sweeter was her goal in last year's showpiece, also against Barcelona, after two years out. She's a goalscoring machine who rarely seems rusty.

WEIRDEST MOMENT The worst booking of Hegerberg's career? Whoever hired DJ Martin Solveig to co-host the Ballon d'Or ceremony in 2018. The Lyon phenom won the inaugural women's award, before Solveig asked if she twerked, which went down badly. Would he ask Luka Modric to pole dance? Probably not.

> LYON'S TALISWOMAN IS LIKE THAT KID WHO HAS TO BE MOVED UP AN AGE GROUP TO KEEP IT FAIR

PETER SCHMEICHEL
DENMARK

Imagine trying to defend in front of Peter Schmeichel – no matter how wonderful your career, you'd still feel like one of those shaky greasy-spoon chefs struggling to make an egg bap for Gordon Ramsay. The tough love worked though: purple-faced Pete is definitely the top Nordic No.1 and a decent shout for greatest goalkeeper ever, given Denmark's unexpected success at Euro 92, various domestic titles and the 1999 Champions League. You don't get that sort of simmering fury from modern keepers.

WEIRDEST MOMENT Such a consistently reliable decision-maker, until he departed Manchester United. For some, Schmeichel's season at Manchester City partly tarnished eight glorious years at Old Trafford, but more worrying was his promotional work for Russia 2018 and Qatar 2022. Sometimes keepers just shouldn't venture out.

TOMAS BROLIN
SWEDEN

If there was ever a meeting of manager and player doomed to fail, it was when maverick Swedish genius Brolin signed for no-nonsense Leeds taskmaster Howard Wilkinson. Brolin was a wildly talented playmaker, delightful at Parma in his early 20s and sensational for his country. However, his transfer to Elland Road derailed him.

Sergeant Wilko thought he was lazy and often played him out of position: the Swede decided to self-sabotage. "Run up and down like an idiot? That wasn't me. So I decided I was going to be piss-poor." He ended up battling weight issues and retiring aged 29.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT Brolin won 47 Sweden caps, scoring 26 goals, and his displays at Euro 92 in his homeland were mesmeric. He smashed a top-corner cracker past Chris Woods to eliminate Graham Taylor's England.

ZLATAN IBRAHIMOVIC
SWEDEN

Where to start with a man who is a legend, who is famous enough to only need one name (trademarked, other Zlatans!), who speaks five languages and is a black belt in taekwondo, who has his own range of computer games and cosmetics, and who is surely the greatest Swede to ever live?

With the football, we guess: since his debut for Malmo in 1999, Zlatan has been relentless. He's racked up more than 850 games, scored over 500 goals for Ajax, Juve, Inter, Barça, Milan, Man United, PSG and LA Galaxy, and become his country's all-time top hitman. His physical assets are clear – 6ft 5in tall, quick, agile and with a fighter's physique. Twinned with a sublime tactical brain, technical excellence, versatility, an appetite for hard work and street cunning, it has produced a near-perfect footballer.

Equally as important to his iconic status, though, are the looks, swagger and wit. Not since Eric Cantona has there been an enigmatic glare to match Zlatan's, nor such a fierce insouciance towards reputations (to Pep Guardiola: "You haven't got any balls"). There's even a likeability about his third person-referencing (signing off at Galaxy with "you wanted Zlatan, I gave you Zlatan... now go back to watching baseball").

Perhaps being funny saves him from the opprobrium that fellow self-worshipper CR7 receives – but Zlatan is one of the few who can match such talk with the walk, too.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT Becoming Sweden's leading scorer? That goal against England? Everyone will have their own peak Zlatan moment, but his 2014-15 season for PSG – 50 goals in 51 games – is frankly insane.

WEIRDEST MOMENT The launch of *Zlatan Pour Homme* aftershave. *FFT*'s perfume reviewer dismissed it as "like watermelon, disappointing, a sheep in wolf's clothing".

PERNILLE HARDER
DENMARK

The most expensive player in the women's game, before Keira Walsh joined Barcelona in September. Chelsea signed the Dane from Wolfsburg for £250,000 three years ago and Harder has since clinched the WSL twice, plus *FFT*'s global poll to determine who would have claimed the 2020 Women's Ballon d'Or, had it not been cancelled because of COVID.

With 70 international goals, the 30-year-old midfielder is Denmark's all-time leading scorer and has YouTube to thank for the inspiration. "It was difficult to find women's football on TV, so I watched clips of Marta," she said. Only Alexia Putellas can match her two UEFA Player of the Year awards.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT Captaining Denmark to qualification for the 2023 World Cup – their first trip to the tournament since 2007.

THORBJORN SVENSSEN
NORWAY

In 1961, the central defender became just the second player in history to reach 100 international games, after England's Billy Wright, who achieved the feat two years earlier. Nicknamed 'Klippen' (The Rock), Svenssen spent his career at Sandefjord between 1945 and 1964 and was widely admired. "During the 1950s, he was one of Europe's best centre-halves," said Per Ravn Omdal, ex-president of the Norwegian FA.

Having also represented Norway at the 1952 Olympics, he finished with 104 caps, one short of Wright, playing his last match aged 38. Only three men, Ronny Johnsen among them, have appeared for Norway at a more advanced age.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT Skippering Norway for the first time at 24, he ended up captaining his country an incredible 93 times. ►

OLE GUNNAR SOLSKJAER

NORWAY

“SOLSKJAER!” It’s one of those surnames you can only ever hear in one particular accent – that of climaxing Clive Tyldesley – even after a 17-year playing career and then another decade in management. That’s the thing about scoring injury-time winners in Champions League finals: people tend to forget about everything else you’ve done.

The elfin Norwegian did some good stuff back home first – helping Clausenengen and Molde to new heights – then hit 126 goals for Manchester United, top-scoring with 18 in his first season. Other highlights: crucial strikes against Liverpool, Villa and Leeds, four versus Forest and Everton, and a cynical match-saving professional foul to thwart Newcastle, taking a red for the team. The baby-faced assassin didn’t just score goals.

Still, he usually played second fiddle to the first choices – Eric Cantona, Dwight Yorke, Andy/Andrew Cole, Ruud van Nistelrooy – and seemed perennially set for a move to Spurs. United accepted offers, he chose to stay. Which makes sense: simply count the medals. He was crucial for Norway though, forming a classic little-and-large double act with Tore Andre Flo; a sort of Stan and Ole.

Solskjaer was a Premier League pioneer, in a way. At Old Trafford, he kicked off like your classic start-hungry supersub, but settled into life leading the new breed of rotation-happy squad bodies; an original Origi, or proto-Chicharito. Modern teams may collect players like Panini stickers but they actually want feel-good pros like him, warming the bench emotionally too.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT A trickier selection than you might think – winning that big final is up there for sure, but for sheer Solskjaerian magic, it’s Nottingham Forest’s City Ground earlier in 1999. United were already 4-1 up when Ole entered, stage left. “Just keep the ball,” said coach Jim Ryan; he scored four in 14 minutes. The new Norwegian sensation might have tapped in five against RB Leipzig recently, but he had a whole hour to do that, the absolute lightweight.

WEIRDEST MOMENT Things only really went awry when Ole became manager. It started awkwardly – stuck in a hotel because he’d rented his Cheshire pad to Liverpool defender Virgil van Dijk – and the strain eventually told. Amid one painful run in 2021, he reckoned the players were confused by the red banners around Old Trafford. Back to Clive Tyldesley: “And Solskjaer has lost it...”

PIA SUNDHAGE

SWEDEN

The Swede is a Yoda-like figure in women’s football, after amassing a then-record 146 appearances for her country between 1975 and 1996. Sundhage made her national team debut as a 15-year-old prodigy, going on to register a joint-record 71 goals and appear on a Swedish postage stamp.

The former forward has since had success as a manager – guiding the USA to Olympic gold in 2008 and 2012, delivering silver for Sweden in 2016 and then winning the Copa America Femenina with Brazil last summer.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT Sundhage was both the best player and leading scorer at Euro 84, netting in both legs of the semi-final against Italy. After scoring one more against England in Gothenburg, she converted the winning spot-kick in the second leg, in a shootout at Luton’s Kenilworth Road.

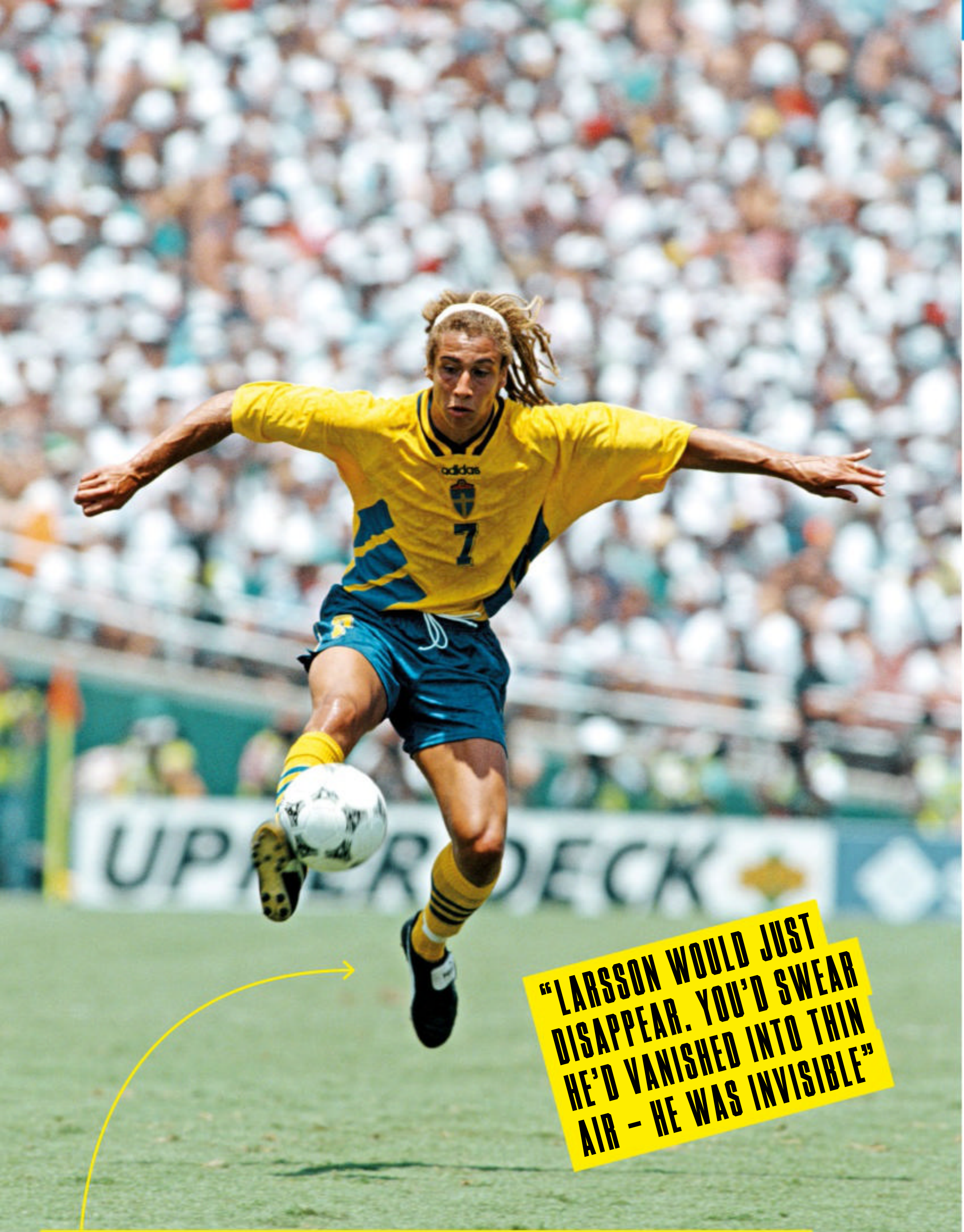
ALLAN SIMONSEN

DENMARK

Did you know that Diego Maradona caused Charlton Athletic’s ’80s downfall? When he joined Barcelona in 1982, it squeezed out Allan Simonsen, who went to Charlton. One problem: the Addicks shelled out £300,000, but were in the Second Division and couldn’t afford him. Cue years of financial strife and a move away from The Valley.

What a signing, though. The prolific Dane had thrust Borussia Moenchengladbach to three league titles, two UEFA Cups and the 1977 European Cup Final: Liverpool won but Simonsen scored a corker and beat Kevin Keegan to the Ballon d’Or.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT That European Cup thump. Trailing to Terry McDermott’s opener, Simonsen seized on a loose pass, reached the corner of the box, considered his options and decided to smash it past Ray Clemence.



“LARSSON WOULD JUST DISAPPEAR. YOU’D SWEAR HE’D VANISHED INTO THIN AIR – HE WAS INVISIBLE”

HENRIK LARSSON
SWEDEN

For Celtic supporters, Larsson is still the ‘king of kings’. For opposition defenders, he was a ghost. “Larsson would disappear,” recalled Motherwell stopper Stephen Craigan about trying to tackle him. “You’d swear that he’d vanished into thin air – he was invisible.”

The Swede was the complete forward: fast, tough, brilliant in the air, explosive and a lethal finisher. Most of all, he was evasive, with an uncoachable instinct for drifting into space and slipping his man.

Some might argue that spending seven campaigns in Scottish domestic football, bamboozling the full-backs of Motherwell and beyond, was far too long for a player of his international pedigree. But at that time, the Hoops were flying high in Europe, Larsson loved Glasgow and his family was settled. “We had something very good going on with Martin O’Neill,” he said. “I was really happy at Celtic and knew I was important there. There was no reason to go.”

Half of Glasgow loved him back. Larsson helped to foil Rangers’ bid for the elusive 10 in a row, and the goals kept flowing: he would end up on 242 goals from 313 games. He got his shot at the big time after leaving Celtic, with two seasons at Barcelona. The first was curtailed by an ACL injury, but the second was magical – especially in the Champions League final against Arsenal, where he broke north London hearts by assisting both goals. A spell with Manchester United, some fine play internationally and a middling management career followed – but nothing would top his time in Scotland.
CAREER HIGHLIGHT The 2006 Champions League Final, where Larsson was the ultimate impact sub. “People talk about Ronaldinho and Eto’o, but I didn’t see them today, I saw Henrik Larsson,” said Thierry Henry. “He came on, he changed the game.”
WEIRDEST MOMENT It’s probably not weird to floorball fans (is there a magazine called *FloorFloorTwo*?), but Larsson was competitive in the hockey-style game as a kid, and after retiring from football, took up the sport again for his hometown club, Helsingborg.

HEGE RIISE
NORWAY

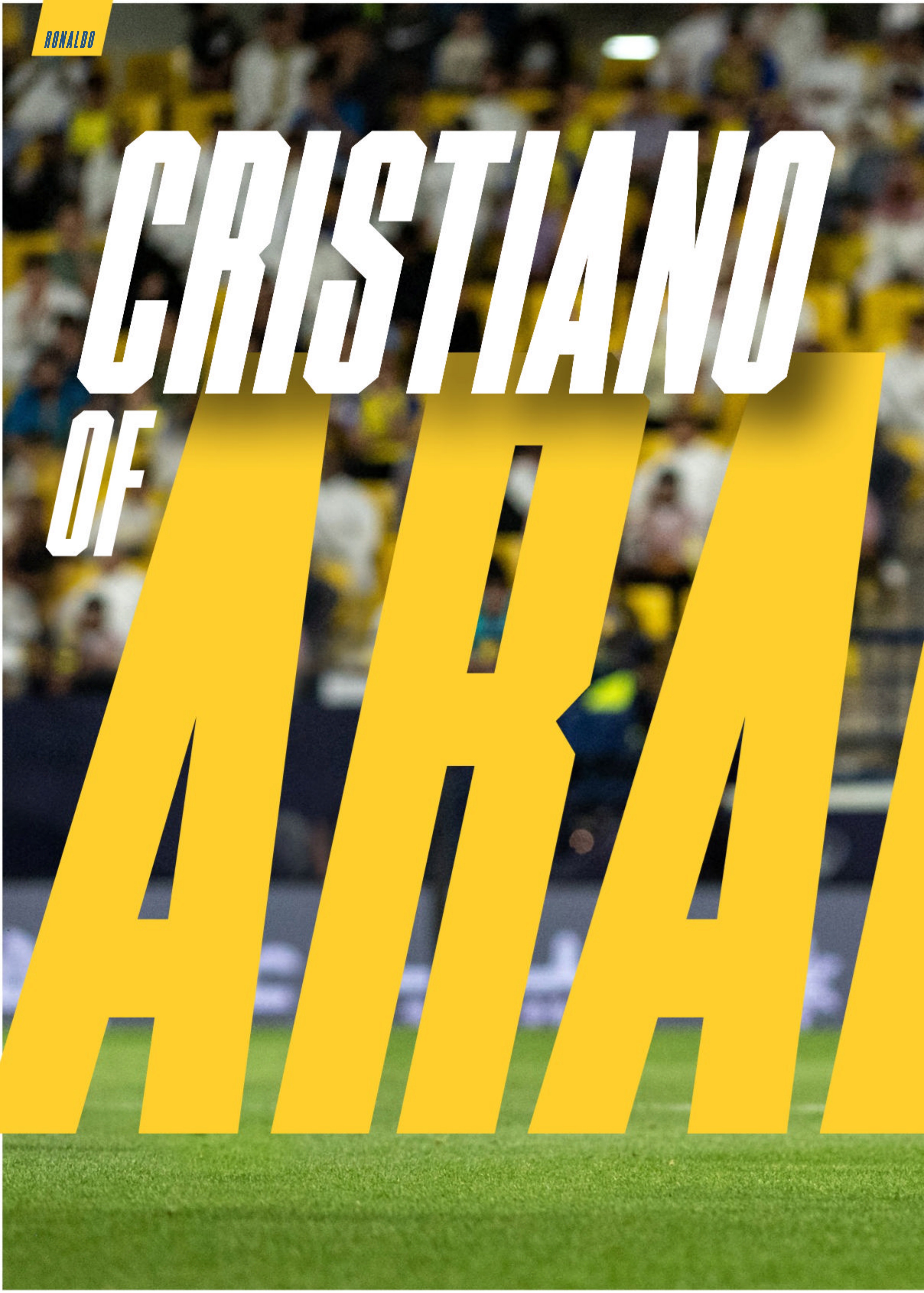
Norway’s women’s coach is an iconic figure in her homeland – and one of the greatest female footballers in history. Riise won the Euros in 1993, the World Cup in 1995 and then Olympic gold in 2000 – a hat-trick of titles achieved by just two other women.

A set-piece queen, Riise was invited by Even Pellerud, her 1995 World Cup-winning coach, to train with Norwegian top-flight club Lillestrom when he moved back into men’s football. “It was to show the players how to take good free kicks,” explained Per-Mathias Hogmo. After a spell as USA assistant coach, Riise became England’s interim boss when Phil Neville departed in 2021, taking charge for the Tokyo Olympics.
CAREER HIGHLIGHT Scoring five goals at the 1995 World Cup in Sweden, to win the Golden Ball as the tournament’s best player.

THOMAS GRAVESEN
DENMARK

He’s principally remembered as a demented Danish wrecking ball – the midfield “Mad Dog” who knocked out Brazilian Ronaldo’s teeth, even though they were on the same team – but Gravesen could also play a bit.

He earned a switch to Real Madrid (Fabio Capello said, “He’s just a bit peculiar... I don’t mess with him”) and won 66 international caps. On English shores, though, he’ll forever be a Goodison Park legend where, as the alpha pup for David Moyes’ ‘Dogs of War’, the Toffees were notoriously robust opponents.
WEIRDEST MOMENT Take your pick: being caught on camera dangling his genitals over the head of Claus Jensen during Denmark training, or nearly hitting Everton’s physio with a firework he’d let off. Such a japester...



CRISTIANO OF ARA

After an acrimonious Manchester United exit, Cristiano Ronaldo has hit the Middle East goal trail, bringing the Saudi Pro League ever greater exposure. He's desperate for yet another league title, yes, but also to start a football revolution...

Words *Mark Lomas*

BIA

More than 27,000 people were on their feet in Mecca, shouting “Siuuu!” at the top of their voices, as Cristiano Ronaldo celebrated his fourth goal of the game in trademark fashion. Al-Nassr were 4-0 up at relegation battlers Al-Wehda, but the home side’s fans didn’t seem all that bothered that they were on the receiving end of a tonking. CR7 was the unquestionable star.

In their previous home match at the King Abdulaziz Sports City Stadium a fortnight earlier, Al-Wehda had lost 2-0 to Al-Fateh in front of a crowd of only 2,455. The holy city welcomes around a million visitors each year for Islam’s famous Hajj pilgrimage, but this time people had come to worship Ronaldo.

In bagging the 61st hat-trick of his career to put Al-Nassr in total control – plundering his 500th league goal along the way – the 38-year-old showed surprising pace to charge clear, fire home a rebound, seal a 4-0 victory, then depart with the matchball. Even in the twilight of his career, Ronaldo remains box office wherever he goes.

HRISTO AND HIGUITA

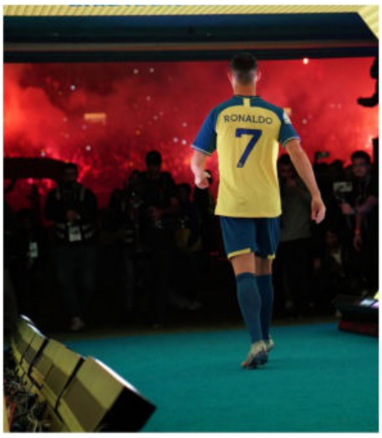
Saudi Arabia has been known to spring the odd footballing surprise over the years. At the country’s first-ever World Cup finals in 1994, Saeed Al-Owairan slalomed through Belgium’s defence to score an iconic goal and secure a shock passage to the second round. Twenty-eight years later in Qatar, the Green Falcons stunned the globe as Salem Al-Dawsari’s superb curling effort sealed a comeback victory over Lionel Messi and eventual champions Argentina in one of the group stage’s most memorable moments.

Yet the December 30, 2022 announcement that Ronaldo had signed for Al-Nassr topped the lot. Supporters were pinching themselves as Saudi marketing executives rubbed their hands together in glee – so, in truth, did Erik ten Hag following CR7’s Manchester United defenestration. One of the greatest players of all time was coming to join the Saudi Pro League. The billboards of the capital Riyadh, where Al-Nassr are based, were quickly filled with images of the Portuguese No.7 in the yellow and blue of his new club.

In Europe, critics quickly pounced on Saudi Arabia for sportswashing, and on Ronaldo for chasing the riyals - he’ll reportedly earn 800 million a season (around £175m) over the course of his two-and-a-half-year deal, making him the highest paid footballer in history. In West Asia, however, no one was listening, the external noise drowned out by the deafening sound of celebrations on the streets of the kingdom.

In Ronaldo’s former stamping ground of Madrid, Saudi journalist Khaled Al-Arafah also felt in celebratory mood. A pitchside reporter for Saudi TV channel SSC, Al-Arafah was working in the Spanish capital and had seen the story develop from distant rumour to growing possibility. Still, though, he felt there were too many obstacles for Al-Nassr to get the deal over the line.

HALA
RONALDO
هلا رونالدو
HALA
RONALDO
هلا رونالدو



“I had some doubts, because after the World Cup, every sports journalist wondered where he’d go,” he explains to *FFT*, having since returned to Riyadh.

“I knew the Saudi Pro League’s strategy is to become one of the top 10 leagues in the world and to do that, of course, you need players. I really hoped he’d come – when it was confirmed, I was happy at the thought of interviewing him after matches, and just tweeted something like, ‘Thank God’. That tweet had around 1.2 million views in three hours, which tells you what Ronaldo is.”

Outside of Asia, interest in the Saudi Pro League has never been particularly high, but ‘The Ronaldo Effect’ was instantaneous. New international channels began broadcasting the league at a stroke and the division now claims to have coverage in more than 120 countries worldwide.

“IT’S LIKE APPLE HAVE MOVED THEIR HQ TO SAUDI ARABIA – HE’S MORE THAN A PLAYER”

“That alone is a tangible impact,” continues Al-Arafah. “Most of the channels have taken two matches per week; Al-Nassr’s game, plus the strongest match of the round. People can see the stadiums, the atmosphere – it’s very positive for Saudi football.”

Ronaldo’s move also catapulted Al-Nassr into world football’s collective consciousness from a position of relative obscurity outside the Middle East. The club had reached the AFC Champions League semi-finals in both 2020 and 2021, and could boast such former

Clockwise from above "Yeah, I'm great"; No.7 shirts are flying off the shelves; billboard big shot; Ronnie is lighting up the game in Saudi Arabia; "Oi, no gawping at my purple socks..."

managers as Fabio Cannavaro, Mario Zagallo and, er, Rene Higuita (plus Billy Bingham in the late 1980s, combining the role with his job as Northern Ireland coach). Ex-players included Hristo Stoichkov and Denilson, but the Knights of Najd have won the league once since 2015, often playing second fiddle to Riyadh rivals Al-Hilal, historically Saudi Arabia's most successful outfit.

"Al-Nassr have gone from having around 800,000 followers on Instagram to more than 14 million, which just shows Ronaldo's value from a marketing perspective," says Al-Arafah. "A friend sent me a photo from Brazil of a kid in an Al-Nassr kit. That would never have happened before."

For supporters of Al-Nassr (the club's name means 'victory' in Arabic), it's taken a bit of getting used to. Abdulmajeed Al-Arrak is a lifelong Nassrawi and recently had his own surprise international encounter with the increasingly familiar yellow-and-blue jersey, at Milan's famed cathedral. "Seeing someone wearing an Al-Nassr shirt in Milan absolutely blew my mind," says Al-Arrak.

"In an historic city, a football city, at that historic place. This is what Cristiano Ronaldo does. It's like having Apple or General Motors moving their headquarters to Saudi Arabia – you don't have an individual, you have this global brand and everything that comes with it. He's more than a player."

Forced to wait for his Al-Nassr bow because of a two-match ban – incurred in England for angrily knocking a phone from a teenager's hand after a Manchester United defeat at Everton – his first outing in Saudi Arabia came in an exhibition match, watched by 68,000 people in mid-January. The opponents? Paris Saint-Germain and Lionel Messi, obviously. The Portuguese lined up for a combined XI featuring Al-Nassr and Al-Hilal players. The Argentine scored once, Ronaldo scored twice, but PSG prevailed 5-4.

CR7's competitive Al-Nassr debut, a 1-0 league win at home to Al-Ettifaq, kept them top of the table. The club's 25,000-capacity KSU Stadium was packed – in the first half of the 2022-23 campaign, their attendances had averaged around 16,000.

Though Saudi crowds are usually strong for the big games, especially the 'Clasicos' between teams from Riyadh and Jeddah, interest tends to dwindle for less important fixtures. Yet Al-Nassr's home matches have remained close to capacity since Ronaldo's arrival, and his presence at away games has boosted gates, too. In February, mid-table Damac welcomed 13,434 for their match against Cristiano & Co, up from 3,646 in their previous home clash.

"There are definitely more tourists going to Nassr matches, and I even have friends from Al-Hilal who go to the game purely to watch Ronaldo live," reveals Al-Arrak. "You also see more people with only a passing interest in ▸

MRSOOL PARK
AL-NASSR FC

football – YouTubers, TikTok stars – because Ronaldo is someone who goes beyond sport."

"I WAS WRONG ABOUT HIM"

Ronaldo marked that match at Damac with another treble in a 3-0 win. Two weeks after his four goals at Al-Wehda, he became the first player to notch two Saudi Pro League hat-tricks this term, despite arriving halfway through the campaign. His razor-sharp finishing has remained – with eight goals in February, Al-Nassr's new captain collected the league's Player of the Month award.

Scoring on the pitch, the Portuguese was also enjoying substantially more privacy off the field than he's ever likely to get in Europe, even if there's little that can be done about the hordes of admirers who flock to Riyadh's restaurants when they hear Ronaldo is dining out. He's the new darling of Saudi Arabia, and while he's still a target for comedians and television shows in the kingdom, he's being absorbed seamlessly into a new media and entertainment landscape. Many watched his Piers Morgan interview in Saudi Arabia, but no local talk show hosts had managed to land their own scoop at the time of writing, with Al-Nassr unsurprisingly keeping access to their talisman very tight.

By early April, he'd amassed 11 goals in his first nine Saudi Pro League matches, playing the full 90 minutes in each of them. It put him five behind the division's joint top scorers for the whole season, his team-mate Talisca and Al-Hilal's Odion Ighalo.

Overseas stars have been coming to Saudi Arabia for several years. Al-Nassr's squad also includes ex-Arsenal goalkeeper David Ospina and former Bayern Munich defender Luiz Gustavo, with Grzegorz Krychowiak, Ever Banega and Cristian Tello (formerly of Sevilla, Valencia and Barcelona respectively) plying their trade at rival teams. Even pre-Ronaldo, the league had been improving.

While the frontman's off-pitch value was never in doubt upon his arrival, not everyone

was certain he'd make the same impact on it. If being dropped by high-pressing disciple Ten Hag at Old Trafford seemed inevitable, his benching for Portugal at the World Cup – and an inability to understand why – made Ronaldo resemble a footballing King Canute unable to hold back his ageing.

He arrived at the KSU Stadium at a tough time for Al-Nassr and manager Rudi Garcia, whose side had been ravaged by a series of injuries to important players. In Ronaldo's second appearance for the club, they lost the Saudi Super Cup to Al-Ittihad, managed by Nuno Espirito Santo and captained by former West Brom defender Ahmed Hegazi.

But Ronaldo's first nine league matches delivered 22 points out of 27. His goals and attitude were credited with lifting the spirits of the depleted squad, particularly the less experienced Saudi players who were asked to step into the starting XI. Another defeat to Al-Ittihad, this time in the league, meant Al-Nassr's opponents leapfrogged them at the summit to lead the league by a point in early April, but many feel the club would have been out of contention for the title by then without Ronaldo.

"There's no question in my mind that he's raised the bar," says Al-Arrak. "I've watched Al-Nassr for a long time, I've seen managers and players come and go; too often it looked like players were just here to pick up a cheque and, honestly, I feared that could be exactly the same with Ronaldo."

Ronaldo's cheque may be unfathomably large, but his desire to win has matched it.

Clockwise from far right "They told me it's not lavender"; goals have flowed for CR7; supporters are packing out Al-Nassr games; "Follow me, or I'll make you go to dinner with Piers Morgan..."

"What I thought about Cristiano was a big mistake," confesses Al-Arrak. "He's shown commitment, even from his first friendly. He's still eager to win every game, eager to break records. You can see the emotion on his face. He wants to give everything and rewrite history here."

SSC reporter Al-Arafah is adamant that Ronaldo has given Al-Nassr more belief. He insists it's not just Ronaldo's team-mates who have shown improvement.

"When the Al-Nassr players see Cristiano training, they try to match his massive levels of dedication," says the journalist. "It's about confidence. Watch them before and now, you can see how much they've improved and are genuinely giving their all.

"The same goes for opponents, too. I spoke to Luiz Gustavo recently and he told me that since Ronaldo's arrival, most of the teams

are giving 200 per cent when they take on Al-Nassr. That makes sense. When you play a game and you know people are watching you around the world, you give everything. It makes Saudi Pro League matches better.”

The idea that Ronaldo is single-handedly raising the standard of both team-mates and opponents may feel a little far-fetched, but the players at other clubs state they’re noticing the difference.

Kaku is a Paraguay international playing for Al-Taawoun – the side who have been heading up the ‘best of the rest’ behind the top four of Al-Ittihad, Al-Nassr, Al-Hilal and Al-Shabab. The former New York Red Bulls midfielder lined up against Ronaldo during a narrow 2-1 loss in February, and admitted the profile of the match felt bigger because of the No.7’s presence.

“Cristiano has changed everything, both at fan level and at a competitive level, too,” Kaku tells *FFT*. “He’s made the league more watched around the world. He’s one of the best in history and facing him was incredible.

“I spoke to him a bit after the match and he seemed to be really enjoying himself in Saudi Arabia. But he also knows the league is extremely difficult.”

While on international duty with Portugal in March – a week in which he netted four goals in two stat-padding matches against Luxembourg and Liechtenstein, and posted a new record as the most capped men’s player in history – Ronaldo made the bold claim that in “five, six or seven years from now, Saudi Arabia will be the fourth or fifth most competitive league in the world if they continue with this same plan”.

As the face of the league, it was difficult to work out whether he was making a genuine prediction or just delivering empty platitudes. However, there’s certainly a belief within Saudi Arabia that Ronaldo is simply the start of a football revolution.

A GULF TO BRIDGE

While the Middle East nation is already feeling the benefit of a Ronaldo-induced publicity boom, his move to Al-Nassr also reverberated around the rest of the Gulf, on a high after the World Cup in Qatar.

Chris McHardy, a radio presenter for Dubai Eye 103.8 and commentator for the United Arab Emirates Pro League, interviewed CR7 as part of Dubai’s Expo 2020 celebrations – delayed until last year because of COVID-19 – and has seen the Portuguese superstar spend plenty of time there in recent years. In Dubai, Ronaldo has often been the guest of Crown Prince Sheikh Hamdan, training at his exclusive Nad Al Sheba sports complex and staying in privacy at the nearby luxury Bulgari Dubai Resort.

McHardy has resided in the UAE for more than a decade and recognises why the Gulf has always appealed to Ronaldo, but reveals he was still surprised to see one of football’s most feted individuals move to Saudi Arabia.

“Cristiano and his family have always loved this part of the world – there’s so much love for him here,” says McHardy. “He’s treated like royalty and afforded more anonymity than he’d get anywhere else. I never got the impression he’d seriously move here to play, but the reverence and respect people have for him offers a great deal of what Cristiano Ronaldo’s personality desires.”

> “IT WILL TAKE MORE THAN RONNIE TO CHALLENGE THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE HERE”

SAUDI PRO LEAGUE CHAMPIONS

2015	AL-NASSR
2016	AL-AHLI
2017	AL-HILAL
2018	AL-HILAL
2019	AL-NASSR
2020	AL-HILAL
2021	AL-HILAL
2022	AL-HILAL

In the UAE, though, there’s no danger of the Saudi Pro League usurping the Premier League for popularity any time soon.

“It was a big deal for a couple of weeks, but interest has largely fizzled out now,” adds McHardy. “The heavyweight European clubs retain a stranglehold on fans’ attention here. If the Champions League is on, that will still dominate – it’ll take a lot more than Cristiano Ronaldo to change that.”

Back in Riyadh, the Saudi Pro League season is gearing up for a fascinating climax, with the final fixtures scheduled for the end of May. Once again, it’s been transfer rumours that have caused social media feeds to spin out of control. Luka Modric and Karim Benzema were recently linked with lucrative moves to the country, while Al-Nassr were said to be trying to lure Barcelona’s Sergio Busquets to join Ronaldo at the club. Al-Hilal have even reportedly made attempts to bring Messi to the Middle East.

“Messi would be the dream,” says sports journalist Al-Arafah with a smile. “It was an amazing moment to have both players on the pitch in Saudi Arabia in January – hopefully one day they’ll face each other officially in our domestic league.

“But even if it’s not Messi, I’m 99 per cent sure you’ll see more outstanding stars in the Saudi Pro League at the start of next season.”

For Al-Taawoun’s Kaku, the possibility of more high-profile players joining Ronaldo is an exciting prospect, one he believes will have the twin benefit of improving standards ever more and creating a more visible shop window for the talent already competing in the Saudi League.

“We heard the talk about Modric, Benzema and Messi,” he says. “The league is growing by leaps and bounds, and that makes it more attractive. Bringing in big-name players is an important detail that will only improve things, and I feel it can push me on to become one of the best in the league, too. It’s my desire to reach Europe – now, by playing well here, I think I can have my chance.”

For 18 months, Newcastle United’s takeover by the Saudi Public Investment Fund kept the kingdom in the football headlines, although it seems like it was just a first step towards deeper influence within the game. Al-Arafah hopes that Ronaldo’s presence and Saudi Arabia’s continuing investment in football will help make people more open to visiting the country to experience live sport.

“We’d really love to have football fans from all over the world come and watch matches here,” he says. “Everyone is welcome and it would be fantastic for people to experience a Saudi Clasico. We hope that Ronaldo is the beginning. It’s only been a few months so far, but it’s been superb and we expect even more to come.”

In the short term, the quest for silverware is at the forefront of Al-Nassr fans’ minds.

“Nassrawis are used to having long periods of no trophies, and the fans will still be here for the team when Ronaldo eventually moves on,” says Al-Arrak. He pauses. “But we’d love for him to have success here.”

Already a league winner in England, Spain and Italy, Ronaldo is chasing Saudi Arabian title glory before his career comes to an end. Maybe it wasn’t exactly what he had in mind even six months ago, but whenever a trophy is there to be won, you can be sure Cristiano Ronaldo won’t give it up without a fight.

“MANAGEMENT IS VOLATILE ONLY THE LUNATICS SIGN UP FOR IT”

Madness has never been far away during Joey Barton’s career, but the Bristol Rovers boss has enjoyed success as a manager – now he tells *FFT* why he’s taking his inspiration from Eddie Howe and, er, Genghis Khan?!

Words Chris Flanagan

“Genghis Khan has got a very bad reputation, not unlike myself. But he was quite innovative in lots of things he did.”

FFT is sat in Joey Barton’s office, just off the M4-M5 junction – when we set off for Bristol on this sunny day, we couldn’t have predicted that the interview would begin like this. Over the years we’ve chatted to numerous Football League managers, but none have talked at length about a fearsome Mongolian ruler barely a couple of minutes into our conversation.

Barton has always been different, though. On his desk at Bristol Rovers’ Quarters training ground sits Jack Weatherford’s best-selling book, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*. It would have been incurious of us not to ask why, and we sense he’s not disappointed when we do.

“It’s the second time I’m reading it,” he explains. “It’s fascinating – I’m obsessed with world history. He was the first person to unite the Steppe tribes, plus there were his tactics around siege warfare. They also figured out how far a horse could run. Say they could run at top speed for 28 miles, they’d put a staging post with men and lots of horses at 26 miles. So I get a message, jump on a horse and ride as fast as I can for 26 miles, pick up another horse and keep doing that so the message gets relayed across the empire. They were in Vienna – if it wasn’t Genghis, it was his sons. They say about 70 per cent of the world’s population can relate their DNA back to the Mongols.”

Barton has always been a juxtaposition, a mesh of contrasting personalities, and it’s perfectly illustrated on one side of his office. On the wall is a UFC photograph, a nod to the more combative elements of his character, which have spilled out at various moments during his long career in football, often to his detriment. Below it, a cabinet full of copious books, tapping into his more cerebral side. He’s already used many of these tomes for inspiration amid a managerial career that’s now five years old.

“I’m quite strange,” he concedes. “I read three or four books simultaneously. I’ll read four chapters of one, then go to another. You find inspiration everywhere – my library’s pretty eclectic. It’s not just sports books, Billy Connolly’s in there – it’s amazing how many sports books you read that don’t inspire you, ▸

then you read one from a pop star and pick up loads you can use in a sporting context. Probably the most impactful book I read was Bill Walsh's *The Score Takes Care Of Itself*. He turned the San Francisco 49ers from the worst franchise to Super Bowl champions."

Now 40, Barton has been at Bristol Rovers for two years – last season, he near enough transformed the Pirates from the worst side in League Two to the best, all in the space of a few months. That came after a difficult early period at the club – taking the job in February 2021, after initially turning it down, he assumed control of a team two points outside the League One relegation zone, and couldn't prevent them plummeting into the fourth tier. In the end, they finished bottom.

"It was a very difficult situation," he recalls. "We had to implement a culture change – it was about restoring professional pride and professional standards. It doesn't take much to lose your way – get a couple of the wrong people in and decent standards can become lax and poor. When we first came in, it was running riot, not just on the training pitch but in many different departments.

"Fixing the football side was the priority – we weren't able to do that, and we suffered relegation. However, that allowed us to clear out a lot of people – it was something like 24 players out and 27 in. There must have been eight, nine or 10 members of staff out as well, in several different areas. Eventually, things started to change."

"THAT WILL TAKE SOME BEATING, EVEN IF I'M IN FOOTBALL FOR 50 MORE YEARS"

Things looked pretty gloomy when Bristol Rovers lost six of their opening 10 games in League Two, sitting just above the trap door to non-league, where they spent a season in 2014-15. As a new team bedded in, they'd risen to 15th by the time the Omicron variant of COVID-19 halted fixtures for a month in December 2021. They really took off after returning to action in January – collecting 54 points from their last 25 games to incredibly ascend to automatic promotion.

If going up was astonishing enough, how they achieved it was even more remarkable. "The week before the last game, we were 3-1 down at Rochdale but then won 4-3," says Barton – Rovers were trailing as late as the 89th minute. The victory put them level on points with Northampton, who occupied the final automatic promotion place and had a five-goal advantage in goal difference.

Bristol Rovers' last game was at home to already-relegated Scunthorpe. "We went 2-0 up after 20 minutes and you expected the ground to be bouncing, but it was flat," says Barton. "Northampton were winning 3-0 at Barrow. By half-time, Barrow had pulled one back, but we still needed five in the second half. I said, 'OK, just score the next goal and see what happens'. We scored the next goal, then every time we went forward, it felt like we were going to score. No more goal news came through from Barrow, and there was a crescendo of noise from the stands, which galvanised the players."

Barton's side couldn't stop scoring. In the 85th minute, on-loan Newcastle midfielder Elliot Anderson headed in for 7-0, sparking the mother of all pitch invasions at a packed Memorial Stadium. It took a while to clear the playing surface, by which time Northampton's match had finished 3-1.

"When Elliot scored, we thought we might need eight, nine or 10," says Barton. "People say the delay helped us, and it did because we knew what we had to do. But I'm telling you, without that delay, we'd have scored eight, nine or 10 – the players were running amok. That day will take some beating, even if I stay in football for another 50 years."

GUARDIOLA'S PEP TALK

After a campaign as extraordinary as that, perhaps it's little wonder that Barton sports grey hairs these days. "Yeah, that's all of the sleepless nights…" he says. "You wake up at about 4am worrying about your defensive corner structure, and then you struggle to get back to sleep."

But Barton knew from a young age that he wanted to be a manager one day. "I was always coaching when I was playing, trying to organise teams, even when I was at junior school," he reveals. "Our teacher was more of a rugby league man, so he leaned on me because of my football ability. We enjoyed a very successful period at St Agnes School in Huyton – it's gone now, they've built houses on it, but it had been there for 50 or 60 years and never won the local cup until our team."

Despite appearing once for England during his career, Barton always felt he'd be more suited to managing than playing. "I'm only 5ft 11in, and I wasn't the most athletically gifted in terms of raw speed and ability," he continues. "Everything I earned in my career, I had to work hard for. I always understood why I was good and strived to make myself a better player. That naturally gave me the chance to coach. I also had psychological challenges – because I got into trouble and had several skirmishes earlier in my career, I started doing psychology to understand why I was making the errors I was making, and experiencing a few issues with anger or behavioural problems."

Barton leaps from his seat and picks out a tome from the cabinet. "This was a book given to me by Peter Kay from the Sporting Chance clinic, based on Carl Jung and the Jungian philosophy, the development of the mind," he says. "It's the spark that made me want to understand myself better. Once you understand yourself, it gives you the chance to understand other people. Most of my job now is understanding people, helping them to improve themselves."

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ST. GEORG
SCAFFOLDING

Many outsiders would assume that Barton's management style is all stick and no carrot, but that's not entirely true. "Some managers are more stick, some are more carrot – the main thing is to be authentic," he says. "If you try to be firm but are putting it on, players will see straight through it. I'm a very truthful person – I have a tricky communicating style because I'm a blunt speaker and naturally lower on empathy than most, but that's my working-class roots.

"I'm also like, 'This isn't real pressure. We're privileged to play sport for a living, so don't get too down because you've not played well – it's better than working on a building site', or countless other jobs I'd be doing if I hadn't made it as a player. You're always trying to find the keys to unlock different personalities. Everybody is different, you just have to treat everyone in a bespoke way."

Above Barton is seized by Pirates **Left** Rovers nick promotion after a ridiculous 7-0 thrashing on the final day, capped by young loanee Elliot Anderson

Barton often took advice from his former QPR performance consultant Steve Black, who passed away last year. "He was a great mentor of mine," he reflects. "He used to say that people don't care what you know until they know how much you care. It can take a lot longer with some people – some might trust you on day one, but with someone else it might take six months.

"The quicker I can build those relationships, the quicker we can all make progress. That doesn't mean I'm going to blow smoke up your arse 24 hours a day. If I need to kick you up the backside, I will, absolutely. But I want to come in, be your mate every day, tell you what great potential you've got and help you work towards that.

"I was lucky to spend some time with Pep Guardiola at an LMA event, and I was struck by what he said, that his job was to tell the players the truth. He said, 'That isn't always easy, but I have to find that relationship with them where I can tell them the truth and the player is willing to receive it'. You have to build those relationships so that the players know when you praise them, it's authentic, and when you critique them, it's for the right reason – to make them better."

For Barton, it was a reunion with the former Barcelona man, who had an unsuccessful trial with Manchester City at the end of his playing career. "He changed next to me for a few weeks and we got on fantastically well – then I didn't see him again for more than 10 years and he became the best manager in the world," smiles the Bristol Rovers boss. "He was joking with me, saying, 'Why didn't you want me to sign for City?!' I said, 'It was nothing to do with me, it was Stuart Pearce. I'd have loved you in the team!'" ▶

"He also said, 'Manchester City is your club, why do you never come back?' But I've just not tended to do that – all the fanboy stuff. If I go back, I'll earn the right to be there. I'm hoping to get good enough at this job to take the teams I'm working with to the Etihad as an opposing boss, or maybe one day manage some of the clubs I played for."

"I'M A WARRIOR"

Barton admits he's always had a few dream jobs in mind. "I'm an Evertonian, and I never played for Everton," he says. "But it's tough – I look through my career at Manchester City, Newcastle, Marseille, Burnley, QPR, Rangers, they're all great clubs. I work for a great club right now that has untapped potential – no one from the city of Bristol has been in the Premier League, which is a challenge for Big Nige (Pearson) at Bristol City and myself.

"If I went back to any of my former clubs, it would be a proud moment, and I'd love to go abroad again. I'd love to coach in Italy or Spain, where I never had the chance to play, and I'd love to return to France, but I think I could only work for Marseille. It would be peculiar for me to work for any other side, so that's a tricky one – they're a massive club."

He does believe that he can reach the top level one day, though. "Yeah, why not?" he insists. "I'm prepared to do the work, it's not something I do for the money. I'm here as a vocation. I'd go bonkers if I was out of the game. I tried punditry and it just wasn't for me. I don't mind doing it the odd time, but not all the time. I'm a warrior, I need to be in the arena of battle!"

Barton never played at a lower level than the Championship, but he had no qualms about dropping into League One when he began his managerial career with Fleetwood in 2018. Aged 35, it marked his retirement as a player, at the end of a ban of more than a year for breaking gambling rules.

"The betting ban had taken me away from playing, and with my rap sheet I thought, 'Who'll give me a start in management?'" he says. "Andy Pilley at Fleetwood was brave enough – it was below the level I'd played at, but if I wanted to be any good at this, I didn't think I had a divine right to go in at Premier League level. It was a brilliant opportunity to learn my trade and at a great club."

He took over a side that had finished 14th in League One, and in his second season he almost guided them into the Championship for the first time. Unbeaten in 12 matches before the pandemic halted the campaign, the points-per-game table put them sixth. When Fleetwood went straight into a play-off semi-final upon football's return four months later, they lost to Wycombe. "If COVID hadn't come, I can't envisage how we wouldn't have gone up automatically," claims Barton. "We were on a fantastic run – you just know when you're on a promotion charge, and it would have been historic at that club."

Midway through 2020-21, Fleetwood were 10th and Barton was dismissed. They went into reverse soon after and have been mid-table this term alongside Rovers, who have steered clear of relegation concerns in their first campaign back in the third tier. Barton told reporters he took "added satisfaction" from winning at Fleetwood on Easter Monday to leapfrog the Cod Army into 14th spot, and that chairman Pilley "was a fool to sack me".

"My third season at Fleetwood was really tough, because Andy's business was badly affected by the pandemic and we lost all our momentum," Barton tells *FFT*. "I think he did me a favour by sacking me – he wanted to cut costs and put some younger players in. That was his prerogative because he owns the club. But I didn't want that, I wanted to finish the job I'd started by getting promoted.

Clockwise from right Joey would love to go back to Marseille, honest; QPR psychologist Steve Black was "a great mentor"; Fleetwood gave Barton a start in the dugout; and he took them to the League One play-offs in 2020

"I'D GO BONKERS IF I WAS OUT OF THE GAME. I'M A WARRIOR, I NEED TO BE IN THE ARENA OF BATTLE!"

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"The two most powerful people at the club weren't aligned, but we ended it as amicably as we could – I'll always be grateful to them for giving me a start. We were the first ever Fleetwood team to beat Blackpool and finish above them in the league, but I was gutted that we never made it to the Championship."

Barton also departed Highbury Stadium with a court case hanging over him, accused of assaulting Barnsley boss Daniel Stendel after a 4-2 defeat at Oakwell in 2019. The pandemic meant legal proceedings dragged on until the back end of 2021, by which time Barton had also been charged in a separate case, accused of assaulting his wife.

Eventually found not guilty in the Stendel case, the second case was dismissed earlier this season, but both made enough headlines to divide opinions about him during his initial days at Bristol Rovers – both among Pirates fans and further afield.

"I had one court case when I came in, we got relegated, then I picked up another that summer," states Barton. "I knew deep down that they were going to go away, because I knew what had happened. But nowadays, you're guilty before you're proven innocent. Months and months later when it's actually resolved, people have already formed their opinion and been judge, jury and executioner on you. I was fortunate here that the owner absolutely believed in what we were doing and took the time to understand what was going on with me.

"It wasn't ideal – you can't be completely focused on your job every single day when you've got court cases rumbling on in the background. So to get them out of the way, it's no coincidence that when the court cases disappear, a smile is back on your face and you can concentrate on giving your all every day to the players. Football has always been my salvation – and whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

FIVE YEARS DOWN, 35 TO GO

Barton knows he's made mistakes over the years – in 2008, he served 74 days in prison for an assault on a night out in Liverpool. He now has a mantra that applies to all aspects of life – one that's noticeably prominent in his Twitter bio, the Japanese word *kaizen*.

"I got that from Steve Black when I was at QPR – it was a big part of Toyota's strategy when they were streamlining their factories," he reveals. "It's about a continuous state of improvement. It's amazing how much you can improve in a short period of time, if you commit to being a better version of yourself today than you were yesterday. In 365 days, it's unrealistic to think you're going to skip out of bed and jump for joy every day. But if you get 300 right, you make sure that, in the others, you don't need to blow the day up."

Barton wants to continue improving Bristol Rovers by improving the squad he works with every day. "I love this job because it's a job of service," he adds. "I can't get on the pitch any more, so how can I teach a player to do what I want instead? Is it a kick up the arse or is it putting things in place for them? When you see them do it in a game under pressure, that's the most rewarding part.

"When Elliot Anderson was here on loan, I'd tell him, 'You're way more advanced than I was at your age. I had an OK career, but if you keep doing this with your attitude, you'll have an even better one'. He's gone on to get in and around Newcastle's team.

"I listened to a great podcast with [cycling coach] Dave Brailsford and he doesn't believe in the stick, but in my experience I responded to the whip. Sean Dyche isn't exactly a stick man, but he knew when to do it, and so did Kevin Keegan. If you told me I couldn't do something, I'd think, 'OK, we'll see about this, I'll show you'.

"Everybody is different. The real skill of the elite-level managers is finding the right key at the right time to deal with some massive personalities – Jurgen Klopp, Pep Guardiola, Sir Alex Ferguson, Arsene Wenger, I'm even looking at Roy Hodgson thinking, 'Wow', now I've walked a mile in their shoes."

Would Barton like to be a manager at 75, like Hodgson? "Oh yeah, I think I'll be one of those where you'll have to carry me off in a box, or at least I hope so!" he chuckles. "That would mean you've been successful. It's a volatile profession – only the lunatics sign up for it and I don't think anyone will doubt me if I turn up in that space.

"But I have no God-given right to it. I've got to do the hard yards and be successful at every level. I take huge inspiration from Eddie Howe, who went in at Bournemouth and then built and built. If you keep working to get better every day, as Bill Walsh's book title suggests, the score will take care of itself. If you don't get better, you get worse – and in this game, if you keep getting worse, you get sacked."

Five years in, Barton's passion for life in the dugout is clear. When he said this was the job he'd always wanted, he really did mean it – even if it wakes him up at 4am, fretting about corners. Genghis Khan may have carved out a mighty empire, but he never had to worry about set-piece routines. ⊙

BITTER SWEET SYMPHONY

Wigan's 2013 FA Cup triumph was followed by relegation three days later and off-field woe for years to come, but it sure felt good at the time. A decade on, those involved tell *FFT* how they sprung one of the cup's biggest upsets

Words Si Hawkins
Additional reporting Richard Edwards

Wigan fans are used to winning things. Oh, just the 22 league titles, on top of countless cups, shields and medals: their lads have lifted more silver than a royal butler, or a very prolific burglar.

Wigan rugby fans, that is. Wigan Athletic Football Club? Barely a shiny pot to pee in by comparison, except for a load of non-league stuff and two Football League Trophies prior to their top-flight debut back in 2005. So, the minted Manchester City were hardly trembling with fear as they lined up opposite the Latics for the FA Cup final on May 11, 2013.

But what an occasion it was. Shocks, tears, rousing speeches, heartwarming manliness, some light backstabbing... and that was all before the game kicked off.

For Wigan, just reaching the showpiece was special. Backed by sportswear millionaire Dave Whelan, who had his own FA Cup final demons to exorcise, this was an opportunity for the football team from the ‘rugby town’ to outshine the Warriors as well as the giant Lancashire neighbours in their own sport: Liverpool, Manchester United, and now City.

“It’s a pretty proud town,” explains Stuart Maconie, the author, broadcaster and long-suffering Athletic aficionado. “But yes, that pride has predominantly been expressed through the rugby team.”

This rankles, as those fans often don’t get on, and many local football lovers choose to support bigger clubs instead. Maconie began watching the Latics in the Northern Premier League; umpteen promotions later, did he dare believe that they could go all the way in football’s oldest competition?

“I always knew that we had a chance,” he insists. “Manchester City hadn’t quite become the petrobillionaire playthings that they are these days. There was still a shred of the old City about them.”

Roberto Mancini’s glittering squad had started 2012-13 in high spirits after winning their first top-tier title in decades, but even that was almost a classic City disaster until Sergio Aguero’s last-gasp intervention. The pressure was on for them to keep delivering.

“With the investment, they made everyone aware, like, you have to try to win everything,” reveals cup keeper Costel Pantilimon, who’d arrived from Romania’s Politehnica Timisoara in 2011. Even training was intimidating. “It was 100 per cent every single day, because competition for places was so high. That was something new, even for my team-mates. OK, not Yaya Toure, maybe, because he came from Barcelona. Or Carlos Tevez...”

Add Aguero, David Silva, Vincent Kompany and Samir Nasri to the starting line-up, plus James Milner and Edin Dzeko off the bench, and this lot could really ruin your afternoon.

Wigan, however, were not robust. Roberto Martinez coaches superstars now, recently becoming Portugal’s manager after six years with Belgium, but he divided the DW Stadium. In his first campaign at the helm, 2009-10, they’d lost 9-1 to Spurs and 8-0 to Chelsea, before opening his second season with home defeats of 4-0 and 6-0 to newly promoted Blackpool and Chelsea again. Three years on, they still couldn’t defend.

Martin Tarbuck was pro-Martinez. He edits the *Mudhutter* fanzine, as a Wigan supporter since they won 1985’s Freight Rover Trophy (glory hunter), so he has seen bad football. And he tells *FFT*, “Stoke were the alternative model – horrible side, but verging on top 10 – whereas Martinez let goals in for fun, playing around at the back.” In the Spaniard’s four seasons, Wigan conceded 275 league goals.

EDGAR DAVIDS: FOLK HERO IN WIGAN

Wembley seemed a long way off in January. Wigan’s FA Cup campaign commenced with a replay victory over third-tier Bournemouth, then a narrow 1-0 win against non-league Macclesfield. It did offer handy minutes to new recruits, such as Honduras international Roger Espinoza, signed from Sporting Kansas City and a Wigan buff even before arrival. The Latics were curiously huge in Latin America.

“Wigan were already part of the Honduran culture,” he tells *FFT*, over Zoom from the US. It stemmed from successful signings during Steve Bruce’s reign. Espinoza adds, “Maynor Figueroa and Wilson Palacios always said, ‘Wigan would be the perfect club for you!’” With Hendry Thomas and Juan Carlos Garcia, too, Wigan warmly welcomed Hondurans.

A rainy night in Lancashire could be oddly exotic, even down in Division Three. Martinez originally joined Wigan as a player in 1995 – one of the ‘Three Amigos’, alongside Isidro Diaz and Jesus Seba, in one of Whelan’s early innovations (“It was regarded as quite a shock,” remembers Maconie, “these three Spaniards in Wigan”). His 2012-13 charges, though, were struggling again. They’d saved themselves from relegation in each of the previous two seasons – latterly by doubling their points tally with an incredible seven victories from their final nine games, including wins against Manchester United, Arsenal, Liverpool and fifth-placed Newcastle – but in February 2013 they were back in 19th. The FA Cup run was a welcome distraction.

A fifth-round trip to second-tier Huddersfield looked tricky, but nope: 4-1, thanks to a goal from emerging winger Callum McManaman, two from Ivorian striker Arouna Koné and one from James McArthur, who’d followed fellow midfielder James McCarthy from Hamilton Academical to Wigan, purely to confuse people. “They were sensational,” beams Tarbuck. “Under Bruce, we’d signed solid Premier League players like Michael Brown and Lee Cattermole, whereas Martinez searched elsewhere for value.”

Top to bottom Four generations and one special day; “Bagsy the shower”; it was elementary for Watson; the, er, Two Amigos...

A quarter-final at Goodison Park looked potentially run-ruining, as this was David Moyes’ impressive usually-in-Europe Everton, not your modern clown-car-driving-off-a-cliff Everton. There was little in it, until Figueroa, McManaman and Spanish midfielder Jordi Gomez blitzed the hosts in a remarkable four-minute spell. A bizarrely comprehensive 3-0 win gave Wigan a semi-final at Wembley.

Manchester City’s progress was far more predictable, thumping Watford 3-0, Leeds 4-0 and Barnsley 5-0 either side of a 1-0 win at Stoke, with Tevez rampant and Pantilimon not conceding a goal. And the other two semi-finalists? Chelsea and Championship outfit Millwall – so Wigan knew who they wanted. Step forward, a Dutch legend managing Barnet.

“Edgar Davids is a folk hero in Wigan, as he did the draw and drew out Wigan vs Millwall,” says Tarbuck, “although that wasn’t a nice game for other reasons...” With City and Chelsea both well on the way to securing Champions League places, the

“I GOT NARKED BY BEING PATRONISED – ‘OH WELL, YOU DESERVED IT...’ OF COURSE WE DESERVED IT”

Top McManaman and Watson go down in history **Above** “So this is what a cup looks like, eh?” (said simultaneously)

other semi was essentially a Europa League qualifier, but the game is largely remembered for off-field action. “Millwall – the hooligan guys!” grins Espinoza, recalling “a big scuffle in the corner”. Disgruntled south Londoners fought amongst themselves as the Latics triumphed 2-0 through wily Shaun Maloney and McManaman (again). “We thought that was our final, really,” says Tarbuck.

City’s tie with Chelsea was a star-studded affair, yet it was Pantilimon who made the headlines, protecting their 2-1 lead by diving at Juan Mata’s feet (“a risky one!”) and then thwarting Demba Ba at point-blank range. Mancini confirmed that the 6ft 8in stopper would start the final. Well, it was only Wigan.

“No! We beat them in the league but it was a difficult match,” says Pantilimon, scolding *FFT*. “Roberto Martinez was the coach, with good ideas. We didn’t think it would be easy. The pressure was high for us.”

Wigan’s schedule was nightmarish, though. Defeat to Swansea in midweek had left them adrift, and they’d need a result at Champions League-chasing Arsenal three days after the FA Cup final to keep their survival hopes alive.

Emmerson Boyce, the Latics’ captain in the cup final, reckons the looming Tuesday drama actually helped the players. “If you asked everyone individually, I think we had an eye on the Arsenal match, so we relaxed,” says the right-back, now technical director of the Barbados FA. “We went for a morning walk and there was an air of confidence about us, that we could compete.”

City had their own problems. Manchester United had already sauntered to the Premier League title, in Sir Alex Ferguson’s swansong season, and rumours swirled about Mancini’s future – resulting, perhaps, in erratic thinking. On Friday, Pantilimon was told he would play. By Saturday afternoon, Joe Hart was back in.

“For Mancini, there was massive pressure as we were struggling,” explains Pantilimon. “We didn’t win the league and this was the only trophy we could win. Maybe something happened in that moment.”

The Romanian, now general manager back at Timisoara, isn’t the type who’d go all-out Gazza on Mancini’s furnishings. Still, he says, “I didn’t accept it, like, ‘OK!’ – it was tough for me. I remember being in my room and crying a bit, because I was frustrated.”

A heart-to-heart with Hart did help, but did Mancini’s switch upset the changing room? “Maybe,” muses Pantilimon. “Everyone was expecting me to play and the decision wasn’t made a day before or something – just a few hours. It was strange for everybody.”

Tales of City’s turmoil leaked, which helped Wigan’s morale. “You absolutely use stuff like that to your advantage,” says Espinoza. “But we also weren’t doing great.”

VERVE AND CONTROL

If the underdogs needed some nerve-settling perspective, they got it pre-match – first of all from Dave Whelan. “In the 1960 final, he had to come off with a broken leg,” Roberto Martinez reminds *FFT*; Wigan’s head honcho, a Blackburn player then, was taken out of the game after 43 minutes at Wembley, as Wolves went on to triumph 3-0. “He woke up in the morning and realised that his team had lost. We asked the FA for permission for Dave to lead the team.”

For Boyce, Whelan’s story – and speech – resonated. “I remember him saying before ▸

“WE DIDN'T KNOW IF WE SHOULD CELEBRATE AFTER RELEGATION... BUT THE PARADE WAS MAGICAL”

Above Would Wigan's fans have traded in the FA Cup for league survival that season? Probably not...

the game, ‘Make sure you enjoy this, enjoy the feeling, because not many players get to sample this... leave here with no regrets’.”

Then came a more impromptu memorable moment involving the Wigan mascot. Joseph Kendrick, son of local reporter Paul, was born with a rare genetic disorder, NKH. Rather than push the wheelchair, “I just thought it'd be comfortable for both of us if I carried him,” says Boyce. “He's one of us.”

Boyce would later receive letters aplenty – “Grown men saying it brought tears to their eyes” – and the unique walk-on took the edge off. “He probably calmed me down more than the other way around,” admits the defender, “because all my attention was on him while doing the line-up and everything.”

Stricken Wigan felt driven, and they started brightly with the skipper right in amongst it. Nine minutes in, his tackle on Aguero led to a counter from Koné, who fed McManaman, who cut inside and curled the ball wide of Hart's far post. The 22 year-old was about to have his greatest game.

But the Latics almost blew it, early doors. Boyce lost possession, Nasri found Silva, Silva found Tevez, and from 10 yards out with the goal gaping, Tevez found the foot of Spanish goalkeeper Joel Robles. It was a magnificent save from the January arrival. “That changed the whole match,” says his relieved captain. “If they score, they could run away with it.”

Instead, Wigan's bold approach kept City busy. “Credit to Martinez: he mixed the game up,” adds Boyce. “He brought McArthur and Espinoza in as wing-backs with a false nine, Maloney, sitting in. McManaman and Koné were fantastic playing a bit wider.”

Making a rare start, the energetic Espinoza pushed upfield to nullify the marauding Pablo Zabaleta. “That was the tactical part – just keep that guy as high as I can,” reflects the Honduran, who helped with morale, too. “I'd won a final in the US a few months earlier, so I had all the confidence. ‘Oh, I win finals’... That was the first one I'd ever played!”

While Espinoza kept Zabaleta honest (if that's the word, given his own theatrics from an Argentine lunge in the box), McManaman was making City have kittens. One mazy run mimicked Ricky Villa in 1981 as he twice put Hart on his rear end before seeing his effort blocked. The finale wasn't going to form.

Half-time, 0-0, and somewhere up near Whelan was Stuart Maconie: he'd wangled a ticket from an old music-biz buddy running Wembley. “The list of media Wiganers was very small,” he says. “I assume he looked at his list and it was me, Richard Ashcroft and Kym thingy from *Coronation Street*. So I was sat in the Royal Box, with lots of City fans.”

The second half began with Wigan still on the attack. On the hour, McManaman sped through a vacant midfield and a run-ragged Zabaleta yanked him over to collect a yellow. Undeterred, the City defender almost forced the breakthrough, his sumptuous ball across Robles' six-yard box narrowly escaping Silva. City were dangerous, but Wigan were on top.

“It felt strange,” reminisces Martinez. “None of us were used to being in a match of that magnitude, but we were so much in control.”

So the other Roberto M made an intriguing call, replacing dangerman Tevez with... Jack Rodwell. And, to be fair, the midfielder nearly headed City in front from a free-kick.

The favourites were a tad worried. Maloney hit the bar – with a cross, admittedly – and Martinez made his sole change. On came Ben Watson, a week after returning from his long lay-off from a double leg break in November. Then, more dramatically, off went Zabaleta, as Wigan's wing wizard made another burst and the Argentine clattered him for a second yellow. “McManaman was unplayable,” says Boyce. “With the red card, I was thinking, ‘It's moving towards extra time – we might have a chance of winning this’.”

But McManaman, who was strongly linked with Liverpool after the final, summoned one last thrust in the 90. Gael Clichy lunged – no penalty. No matter, as instead followed the finest corner-kick in Wigan Athletic's history.

Maloney curled it to the near post, where Watson evaded Rodwell and leapt. His ginger buzzcut connected beautifully, sending the ball arcing into Hart's net. Cue an incredible high-pitched shriek, the kind you'd expect to hear if Ed Sheeran (or whoever was popular in 2013) had walked into the family stand.

“I was crying and everything,” Tarbuck tells *FFT*. “My mate's grandad kept shouting, ‘How long's left? HOW LONG'S LEFT?’ My mate said, ‘I don't know!’ and his grandad said, ‘WELL, FIND OUT!’ He was shaking him, this bloke in his eighties, getting so carried away!”

Over in the Royal Box, Maconie had “just landed after jumping” and got a nice surprise from his son-in-law. “He said, ‘Look in your pocket’. He'd put a bet on: Wigan to win 1-0.”

There was added drama in added time. City threw Dzeko on, and everything at Wigan, but having been leaky all season, the Latics' defence coped. Cue Martin ‘Agueroooo’ Tyler: “Wigan have done it! Unbelievable, for Dave Whelan, for Roberto Martinez... the late, late goal has made Ben Watson a hero here. It's Wigan Athletic's cup. Yes: Wigan Athletic.”

“WHERE DID EVERYBODY GO?”

Boyce's lasting memory is of Whelan's face afterwards, and of “walking up those steps, hugging him at the top and saying, ‘You can rest now’, because his team had finally won the FA Cup”. Then Boyce lifted it. “I showed it to my brothers. This was the FA Cup we'd all dreamed about as kids’.”

Wigan's schedule meant that, sadly, reality soon kicked in. “I couldn't even celebrate in the changing room,” laments Boyce. “I went for a drugs test immediately after the game. When I came back, the changing room was deserted. I got dressed and sat on the bus...”

Winning in the Royal Box was strange, too. “I was actually narked,” complains Maconie. “They were being a bit, ‘Oh well, you deserve to win’ – this patronising tone, sort of patting me on the head. Of course we deserved to win!” He won twice, in fact. “We left £100 in profit. To spend on booze.”

Tarbuck experienced a surreal coach trip home, interviewed by BBC Radio 5 Live while a row broke out about pubs. “It turned sour,” he remembers. “They've just won the FA Cup, but the driver wouldn't stop. I think we were in Nuneaton when he eventually relented.”

The team bus arrived home late, then had to head back to London on Monday for that seismic league encounter at Arsenal. After a decent start, Wigan wilted and the Gunners prevailed 4-1. “Winning that final took a lot of energy from us,” says Espinoza. Three days after their zenith, Wigan were relegated.

At least they finished the season. Mancini was sacked on the Monday, exactly one year after clinching the league. “I had a discussion with him; we sorted it,” says Pantilimon, who didn't have to wait long for his Wembley moment, winning the 2014 League Cup Final. He played his final City game a week later in a 2-1 FA Cup defeat... to Wigan. Almost as incredibly as in 2013, Championship Wigan would defend their trophy at Wembley – but lost their semi-final to Arsenal on penalties.

Martinez replaced Moyes at Everton (those four minutes in the quarter-final at Goodison certainly made an impact) and Wigan's team was broken up after relegation. On May 14, though, they'll reconvene at the DW in aid of Joseph's Goal, the charity supporting cup mascot Joseph Kendrick. “Most of us haven't seen each other since the final,” says Boyce, also a trustee of Wigan's Community Trust.

Maloney became Martinez's assistant, then returned to Athletic as manager this year to battle relegation once again, this time in the

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second tier. Espinoza went back to Sporting Kansas City. McManaman drifted down the divisions, bedevilled by injury. But they, and Watson & Co, will forever be Latics legends – not that they realised it at first.

"It was a strange feeling: we got to Wigan and didn't know how to act," says Boyce. "Do we celebrate because we won the cup, or be respectful because we'd been relegated? But when we had that parade, all the fans came out. It was absolutely magical."

Ask most long-serving Latics – players or fans – and they'll choose the cup over staying up. In a way, that parade celebrated Wigan's whole eight-year Premier League adventure, with the FA Cup as the cherry on top.

"There were literally 30,000 people there – it was phenomenal," says Tarbuck, reflecting on happier times. "I've never seen anything like that for the rugby."

A DECADE OF DECAY

The next 10 years hasn't *all* been misery for the Latics... but most of it was

Wigan's FA Cup win was tainted by relegation; now the 10-year anniversary arrives at a similarly bad time. They've been dogged by financial difficulties since the Whelan family sold up in 2018.

On the pitch, the Latics' 2013-14 Europa League adventure didn't go swimmingly well – coming last in a group containing Rubin Kazan, Maribor and Zulte Waregem – but they managed to pull off a bigger shock than Wembley by beating City 2-1 at the Etihad Stadium, this time as a Championship side, in the FA Cup quarter-finals. "It was meant to be their revenge match," recalls Boyce. "For me, to beat them again was the best game of the two."

But next came a defeat to QPR in the Championship play-offs, and Wigan went down to League One a year later. During a dizzy yo-yo period – relegation, champions, relegation, champions – they sunk City in the cup yet again to seal an unlikely hat-trick, before seemingly stabilising at last in the second tier.

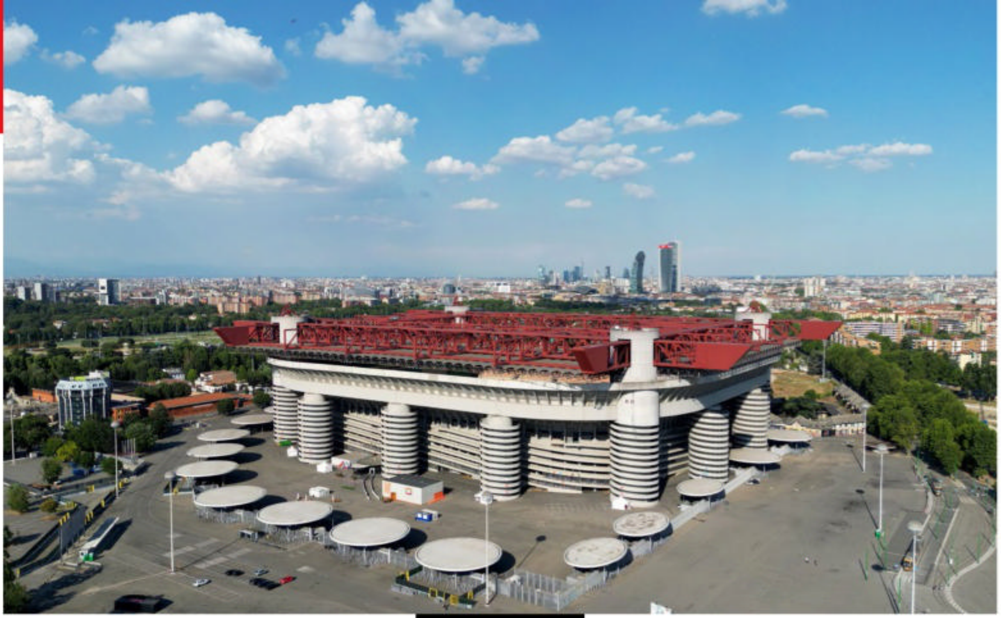
Not so. In 2019-20, shortly after COVID-19 hit, the Latics went into administration almost out of the blue, then had 12 points deducted to consign them to relegation. Without the lost points, they would have finished a comfortable 13th.

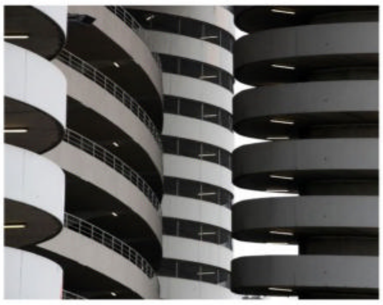
Back in the Championship again this season, Wigan were struck by another points deduction, for failing to pay players' wages on time four times in nine months. "It seems to be drama after drama," says Boyce. "It's never boring at Wigan."

THE FIGHT TO SAVE SAN

SIRO

Milan's iconic stadium has been set for demolition for years, yet uncertainty rumbles on. As *FFT* discovers, not everyone agrees with the plan – even Bruce Springsteen... | **Words** Tom Gennoy





Clockwise from top A unique sight, and site – no commerical district here; multi-storey car park chic; back then, of course, it was all fields

If you come by car, you may spot it from the motorway. Milan's landscape is flat, its buildings low, so the enormous beams that criss-cross the stadium's roof, 80 metres from the ground, are easy to see from afar.

If you come by tram, you'll catch a glimpse somewhere along the Via dei Rospigliosi. Between the heads of your fellow passengers, you'll see the easternmost roof beam as the ground draws nearer. It may be the trusses of the middle section or the tapered end that juts out over the Curva Sud, a wine-red blade slicing into the sky.

Your first sight of San Siro will be most dramatic, however, if you come on the metro. Arrive in daylight and you'll be met with a tantalising semi-reveal as you ascend from the platform, the building's imposing silhouette just visible through the metallic mesh that covers the station exit hall. When you step outside, you see the whole thing in all of its otherworldly glory; the famous columns, the ramps, the naked heft of the stands and the sheer neck-craning scale of the roof. How could anyone want to tear this temple down?

The basic argument is as follows: in order to keep up with their European competition, Milan and Inter must increase their incomes. To do this, both clubs need a new stadium. Either they demolish and rebuild at San Siro, or they leave and build elsewhere – in which case, the current ground will probably have to come down anyway, as it can hardly be left standing around in decay.

Plans to raze and replace this stadium have been circulating for years. So, what's taking so long? Will they, won't they, and why? In search of answers, *FFT* travelled to Milan for a tale of footballing royalty and architectural majesty, of political gridlock and bureaucratic inertia, of burning mopeds and, inevitably, Silvio Berlusconi. We'll tackle questions and raise many others, in pursuit of an answer to the toughest one of all: how do you solve a problem like San Siro?

LA SCALA DEL CALCIO

Opened in 1926, San Siro – named after the district of Milan in which it was built – was a modest little ground in its first iteration, yet radical in one important sense. Whereas most Italian grounds feature running tracks, Milan's football-focused venue has always brought fans closer to the action.

The second phase of the development, completed in 1955, saw it attain the status of an architectural great. Engineers added a semi-autonomous second tier, giving the stadium its trademark exterior: those sloping concrete ramps that wrap around the ground.

In 1980, it was renamed Stadio Giuseppe Meazza, after the legendary Inter and Italy forward who also had a spell with Milan and had died a few months earlier. Finally, in time for the 1990 World Cup, the arena was elevated and enhanced once more with the addition of a third tier, which takes fans to nosebleed heights on three sides of the pitch. The roof, and its unmistakable beams, dates from this phase, as do the venerated exterior columns whose gentle walkways reproduce the motif of the second tier with a hypnotic spiral twist.

Fast forward to 2019 and the stadium's tenants seemingly signed its death warrant. To colossal fanfare, Milan and Inter jointly presented plans for a new ground on the site of San Siro. The Meazza was to be destroyed. One year later, Italian heritage authorities cleared the stadium ready for demolition, confirming that there was neither a cultural nor an artistic reason for its preservation.

"I love San Siro; I'd like to stay here forever and die watching Milan inside this stadium," declares Alessandro Jacobone, a red-and-black-blooded reporter who runs a Milan fan club and dedicates his life to following the team. "I have a heart that beats for San Siro. I grew up here back in the days before the third tier and the roof. But the future of Milan must come first."

Jacobone is convinced San Siro is holding back his beloved Rossoneri ("and Inter too, whatever"). In 2022, Milan were bought by US-based investment group Redbird Capital. The €1.2 billion price tag was a record for a European football club outside the Premier League. The prospect of a new stadium, with all of its attendant money-making potential, made up a sizeable part of the project – and the owners now want to push on with what they paid so much for. They have no tolerance for dithering or delay. "They have knowledge and knowhow about building stadiums," continues Jacobone. "And they're American: time is money."

Redbird Capital want to make money from sellable naming rights, lucrative concessions, hospitality lounges, offices, concerts and NFL games – revenue streams of which the existing stadium offers next to none.

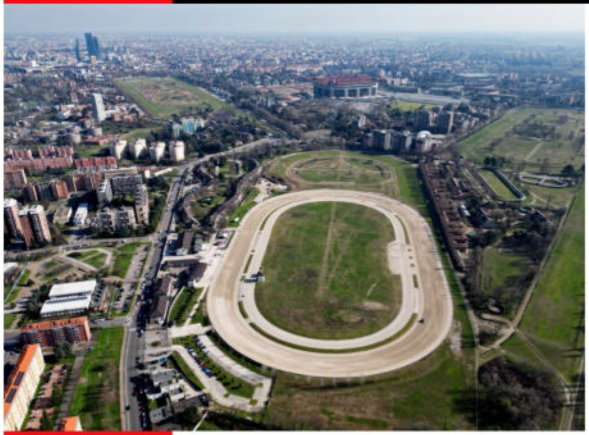
San Siro in its current form certainly isn't swamped by amenities. Inside and out, there is very little to be found in the way of comfort or commerce. The barren landscape that surrounds the ground is only punctured on matchdays by burger vans and people selling scarves and souvenirs.

"It's a monument languishing in the middle of nowhere," says Jacobone, gesturing into the void in front of the stadium. There are no cafés, no shops, no restaurants. Crucially for Jacobone, there isn't even a crèche. "You can come here to see the match, but if you have your wife and kids, there's nowhere for them to spend time waiting for you to watch the game," he laments.

It might not top the childcare tables, but for footballing pedigree, few grounds come close to San Siro. 'La Scala del Calcio' – the counterpart to Milan's world-renowned opera house – is as impressive a stage as a football stadium can hope to be. Across two World Cups, one European Championship and four European Cup or Champions League finals, the Meazza has provided an unforgettable backdrop to history.

The list of players who have called it home is no less than a roll call of greats. Maldini (Cesare), Maldini (Paolo), Rivera, Baresi, Gullit, Van Basten, Shevchenko, Ibrahimovic, Baggio, Pirlo, Eto'o, Ronaldo, Ronaldinho, Cafu, Kaka, Suarez, Zanetti, Matthaus... countless legends have taken up residence in this house.

Then there's the Derby della Madonnina, named after the golden statue of the Virgin Mary at Milan's Duomo (from whose perch, on the cathedral roof, it's possible to see San Siro in the distance). The meeting of these



Top and bottom A nearby chariot racing arena is Milan's preferred location for their new home; San Siro 1-0 Ben Hur

two elite clubs – Milan remains the only city in Europe that is home to two Champions League winners – is a classy derby that takes place in an appropriately classy setting.

Each gigantic tussle sees the Curva Sud and Curva Nord draped in stunning tifos, terrace tapestries woven from pitch level right up to the rafters. They, too, are part of the exquisite attraction of the ground.

By no means, however, are the supporters always on their best behaviour. In a 2001 game between Inter and Atalanta, a curious trophy appeared in the Curva Nord: a moped, belonging – so the tale goes – to the opposing *capo* and captured in a pre-match scuffle. It was beaten, burned and dumped over the railings in the second tier.

They would never have managed it, had it not been for the stairless access provided by the stadium's exterior ramps. Nowhere else in the world would this legendary terrace jape (or act of hooliganism comprising theft, arson and criminal damage, depending on your viewpoint) have been possible. "This stadium is iconic; the memories, the history in the walls, the magic in the air," enthuses Nima Tavallaey Roodsari, lifelong Interista and editor of SempreInter.com. "It's a big part of Inter's identity to play at San Siro."

Until 1947, the Nerazzurri played their home games at the Napoleonic Arena Civica in the city centre. The club struck roots at San Siro after beginning a groundshare with Milan. "But it's time to make new memories," surmises Roodsari, clear-eyed and clinical.

BOB MARLEY AND THE POPES

While the Rossoneri are flush with Redbird readies, Inter's finances aren't nearly as secure. Their rivals have repeatedly stated that they're ready to go it alone if Inter can't find the cash. In February this year, Milan announced they had identified a new patch of land on which to build – by themselves. La Maura, barely half a mile from San Siro, is currently the site of a chariot racing track but privately owned and available for purchase.

Inter's response was to declare that they, too, had found a location – top-secret, of course – outside the city limits but within the metropolitan area, and that they had signed preliminary documents with the site owner.

Some 24 hours passed until Italian papers identified the 'top secret' location as the spacious southern suburb of Assago. After another 24 hours, a press release from local authorities in Assago proclaimed that there had, in fact, been no contact between Inter and themselves, and they were unaware of any preliminary agreement over a stadium. If they should receive proposals for a new ground, which would naturally affect traffic in the area, they would take necessary steps to defend their territory.

And so, following a whirlwind few days, the carousel completed a full rotation and dropped Inter back where they had started – at San Siro. "The two clubs won't wait much longer," says Roodsari. But the clubs aren't the only ones with a say in what goes on.

Luigi Corbani, former vice-mayor of Milan, is the president of the 'Si Meazza' committee, a citizens' initiative to safeguard the ground. *FFT* meets him in the city centre, between the Scala and the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele – a world-famous theatre and a grandiose tribute to a nation builder – to discuss the cultural importance of a football stadium. ▸

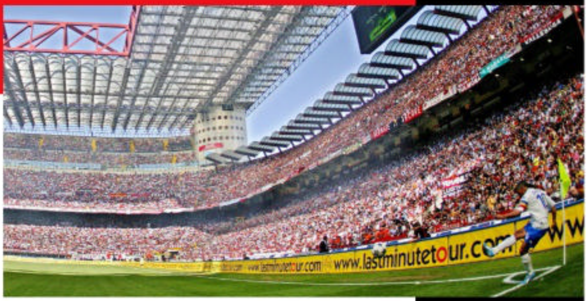
"THIS GROUND IS ICONIC; ALL THE MEMORIES, THE HISTORY IN THE WALLS, THE MAGIC IN THE AIR"

"It's a symbol of Milan, not just because it is known all around the world, but because the building is the embodiment of a city that knows how to transform without losing its original identity," says Corbani, with a poetic politician's flair. He's determined to fight the misappropriation and destruction of public property. The stadium, after all, belongs to the citizens of Milan. Why hand it over to the football clubs only so they can tear it down? Wouldn't a privately-owned replacement see San Siro reduced to the status of a financial asset for the super-rich investors who own Milan and Inter?

Corbani's companion on the committee is a concert promoter with famous friends. Claudio Trotta reminisces to *FFT* about Bob Marley's mesmerising 1980 performance in the Meazza and the fabled visits from two Popes, Benedict and Francis, each attended by around 80,000 worshippers.

Soon he alights on his favourite subject. One client of whom he is proud, an American rock star of some renown whose concerts in Italy it is Claudio's job to organise, apparently has a great amount of sympathy with the committee's cause. "As Bruce Springsteen said," recounts Claudio, "'When you destroy a stadium like this, you don't just destroy the cement or concrete – you destroy the soul of the people who were inside'."

Last December, Vittorio Sgarbi, the Italian Undersecretary for Culture, stated that he would do everything in his power to protect San Siro from the bulldozers. It was a promise to play the conservationists' trump card, enacting the elusive *vincolo* – an injunction from Italian heritage authorities, forbidding the building's destruction. Soon afterwards, however, Sgarbi's own boss insisted those promises were meaningless by announcing that decision-making power rested solely with the mayor of Milan.



THANK YOU BOB MARLEY

Above Divine Ponytail, divine setting; is every little thing gonna be all right for Milan's temple?

Luciano Mondellini, editor of Italian football and finance journal *Calcio e Finanza*, laughs out loud as remembers the mess that was made by Sgarbi's short-lived pronouncement. "You've got Sgarbi, who says that he will veto demolition for artistic reasons – then you've got his boss at the Ministry of Culture, who says, 'No, the veto doesn't exist'," chuckles Mondellini. "So, who's right? You'd need to be a jurist to work it out."

None of this is any help to the Milan mayor, Beppe Sala, whose thankless job it is to decide what happens next. It's up to him to keep Milan and Inter happy without destroying his city's heritage; to protect municipal property without chasing two historic football teams out of town. The *vincolo* is exactly what he needs: an outside intervention to relieve him of the responsibility for making an impossible decision. "The last thing Sala wants is to go down in history as the mayor who tore down San Siro," explains Mondellini.

IN 2020, ITALIAN HERITAGE AUTHORITIES DECLARED NO CULTURAL, ARTISTIC REASON TO PRESERVE THE STADIUM

Sala has further been subjected to public pressure to greenlight the new stadium from Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, whose patience with the ongoing saga is wearing increasingly thin. Salvini, in turn, has found himself at odds with the opinion of another powerful politician. Silvio Berlusconi, the former Prime Minister who also happened to own Milan for more than 30 years, has been a vocal critic of the plans to destroy Stadio Meazza. Mondellini summarises the situation well: "It's very, very complicated."

In a story of so many lasting uncertainties, here are a selection of straightforward facts. The stadium will host the opening ceremony at the Winter Olympic Games in 2026. Sala's second and final term as mayor concludes in the same year, meaning Milan will have a new municipal governor. The current lease deal between the city and the two clubs – the basis for Milan and Inter tenancy at San Siro – expires in 2030.

There is a great number of possible endings to this palaver, plenty of which are plausible, and many of which involve a gloomy climax for Stadio Meazza.

Nothing is settled yet, but dark clouds are forming over San Siro and time is not on the stadium's side. If you've never been, go soon. The future of a footballing icon is hanging by a thinning thread. ○

SAN SIRO'S ICONIC CLASHES

Featuring classic finals, famous photos and the greatest foul in football history

ITALY 1-0 AUSTRIA (1934)

Eight years after its opening, San Siro hosted three games at the World Cup. Germany overcame Sweden 2-1 in the quarter-finals before a paltry 3,000-'strong' crowd, then 35,000 watched Italy's semi-final against Austria. Enrico Guaita scored to steer the hosts towards a controversial Mussolini-inspired World Cup triumph in Rome days later.

CAMEROON 1-0 ARGENTINA (1990)

Diego Maradona's Argentina turned up as world champions for Italia 90's curtain-raiser, only to lose 1-0 to nine-man Cameroon, whose second red card was courtesy of Benjamin Massing's sensational act of war on Claudio Caniggia. San Siro's other five games at this tournament all involved West Germany; only one involved Frank Rijkaard's spit, though.

INTER 0-6 MILAN (2001)

The pair finished fifth and sixth in the 2000-01 Serie A – Inter just ahead, despite the derby's biggest ever defeat. Andriy Shevchenko (above) netted twice, Serginho once… and so did pub-quiz answers Gianni Comandini (twice) and Federico Giunti (once). Neither had scored a league goal for Milan before. Neither scored a league goal for Milan again.

INTER 0-3 MILAN (2005)

Milan edged Inter on away goals in the 2003 Champions League semi-finals, despite both teams playing both legs at home; two years later, they met again in the quarters. The second leg was abandoned after Inter supporters struck Milan keeper Dida with a flare: Milan, comfortably ahead anyway, were awarded a win and we all got a great photo.

REAL MADRID 1-1 ATLETICO (2016)

In the first of San Siro's four European Cup finals, Inter's 1965 side beat Benfica 1-0 to lift the trophy in their own ground, and no club has done it since. They've all been tight affairs here: Feyenoord saw off Celtic in extra time (1970), Bayern Munich beat Valencia on penalties (2001), then Real Madrid boringly did the same to their upstart rivals (above).

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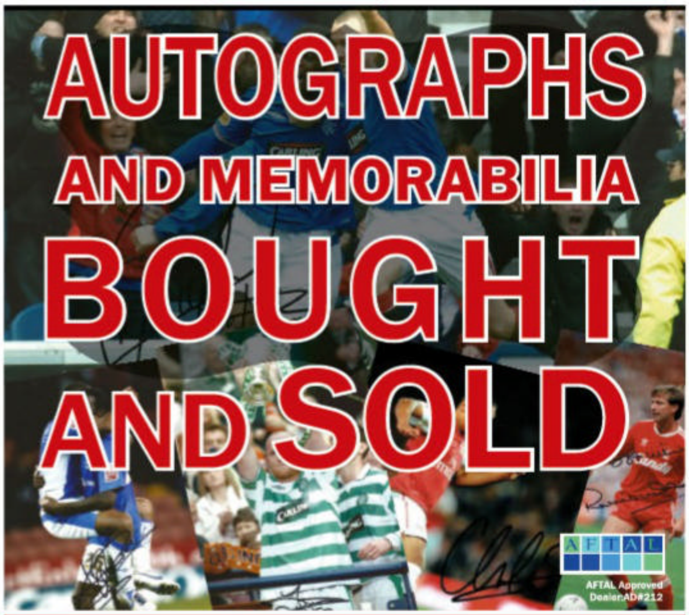
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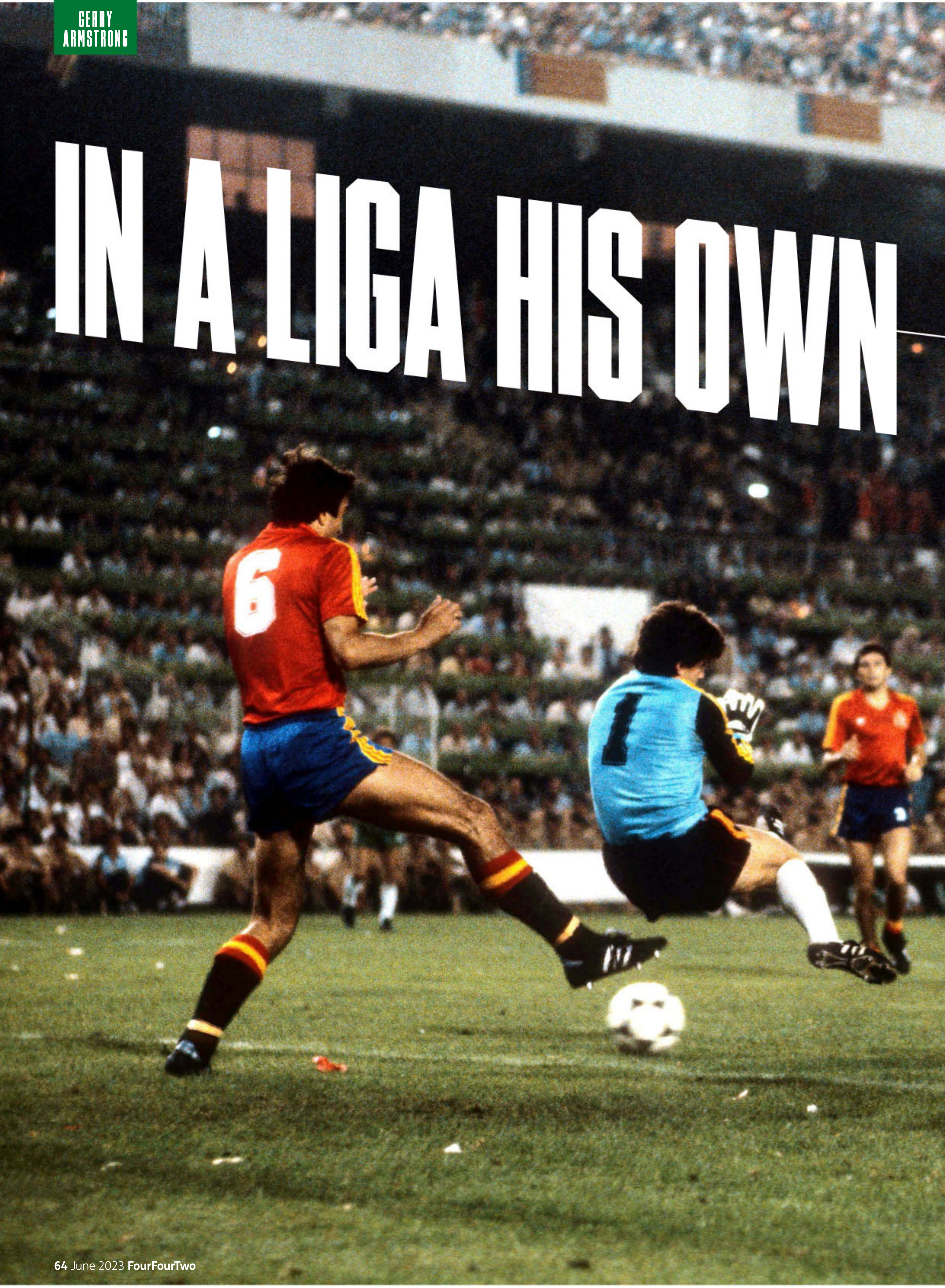


Gerry Armstrong's famous World Cup winner in Valencia paved the way for a Spanish adventure – now the Northern Ireland great tells *FFT* how it happened, via Spurs, Watford and a few Belfast punch-ups...

Words Gerry Cox

BIG MAN! It's a nickname for burly, bustling centre-halves and centre-forwards, but few merit the epithet quite like Gerry Armstrong.

Bustling centre-forward? Tick. Burly centre-back? Also tick, along with a few other positions over the years at Spurs, Watford, Mallorca and more.

Big character? Without doubt, having grown up in west Belfast at the height of Northern Ireland's Troubles. In *My Story, My Journey* he told many a tale of scrapes settled with a right-hander, usually from Armstrong himself, on or off the field.

Big-game player? This is the man who scored the goal that secured his nation's first World Cup appearance for 24 years, then bagged a famous winner against the hosts, Spain, at the tournament itself.

That June 1982 evening in Valencia changed the Ulsterman's life and had reverberations far beyond football. "Back at the team hotel," Armstrong recalls to *FourFourTwo* now, "there were hundreds of messages from around the world; from the Taoiseach of Ireland, from the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, from the Reverend Ian Paisley... telegrams came from everywhere, from all denominations. There were street parties across Ireland.

"That's when Norman Whiteside's mum [a Protestant] was invited by my mum [a Catholic] to go from the Shankill Road to the Falls Road for tea and sandwiches. Camera crews were there. It broke down all of the barriers. Politicians had tried for years to bring the communities together, but football did it in one World Cup game.

"I think that's our greatest achievement from that World Cup – what it did for the people. They were really down and we gave them something to cheer them up."

"WE COULD HAVE WON THE SEMI-FINAL"

Armstrong – actually only 5ft 11in tall – scored a dozen goals for Northern Ireland, including three at the 1982 World Cup, ▸

which put him among the top five scorers at the tournament. He had also netted in a draw with Honduras, then in a 4-1 defeat to France in the second group stage. "But people only ever remember that one goal," he chuckles.

For the benefit of those who haven't seen the goal against Spain that defined his fate, Armstrong intercepts the ball deep inside his own half, two minutes after the interval, and plays it out wide to Billy Hamilton. Over to the late John Motson: "Gerry Armstrong, what a worker he is, striding away there, with Hamilton to his right and Norman Whiteside up on the far side of the area. It's still Billy Hamilton, he's got past Tendillo – Arconada – ARMSTRONG! Northern Ireland have scored through Gerry Armstrong!"

After skipping past defender Miguel Tendillo in the Valencian's home stadium, Hamilton had floated in a cross and goalkeeper Luis Arconada, fresh from a second consecutive La Liga crown at Real Sociedad, had utterly failed to deal with it. Spain's captain palmed the ball out to Northern Ireland's No.9, who duly thumped it back past him.

What the TV replays failed to capture was the sense of shock in the ground. The home crowd were so stunned, Armstrong thought the goal would be disallowed. "The referee hadn't given us anything all night," he says, "so when it went quiet after the ball went in, I thought he'd found a way to disallow it. But then he pointed to the centre spot."

Northern Ireland even survived going down to 10 men for the final half-hour following defender Mal Donaghy's harsh sending off. They knew they could hold out. Armstrong reminds us that Billy Bingham had moulded a stellar team, featuring world-class players from some of England's top clubs.

"We had big Pat Jennings in goal and he set the standard for everybody," continues the 68-year-old. "He was sensational, making saves that no other keeper could. For three or four years, he was the best goalkeeper in the world; nobody could touch him. He could jump higher than anybody else, he had a big, long reach and he had massive hands – like shovels, they said!"

The defence was rock solid and the midfield marshalled by Martin O'Neill, an English and European champion at Nottingham Forest. In attack, Armstrong played with Hamilton and Whiteside, the tyro who was barely 17.

"We had a complete side – nobody wanted to play us," explains Armstrong. "We won the British Home Championship twice, qualified for two World Cups and should have qualified for Euro 84 after defeating West Germany home and away, but they scored more than us and went through on goal difference."

Above A match that ultimately shaped a career **Below** The look of "Did that just really happen?"

Remarkably, Bingham's World Cup squad also contained four part-timers from the League of Ireland. "Georgie Dunlop, Felix Healy, Jimmy Cleary and Johnny Jameson," adds Armstrong. "It was a fantastic chance for them to be involved and a part of that."

The leader was O'Neill. "When we crossed the line, Martin was in control," remembers Armstrong. "He had the leadership qualities and a brilliant brain, which he proved when he became a manager with great success.

"Martin scored important goals, too. One against France that was disallowed could have put us through to play West Germany in the semi-final. I've watched it loads of times and it's so far onside, it's untrue, but the linesman raised his flag. That would have made it 1-0, like the Spain game, and I know what we'd have done after that as we did it many times: closed up shop. We had to win and France only needed a draw – we had to take chances and got punished.

"And I'm sure we could have beaten West Germany in the semis. We beat them 1-0 in Belfast less than six months later. People called that a fluke because it was in Belfast, but we played them in Hamburg afterwards and won 1-0 there. That's why we could have beaten them at the World Cup – you never know what's possible."

GERRY AND NO PEACEMAKERS

This 'What if?' story is one of many *Sliding Doors* moments in Armstrong's life, going right back to the start of his career. Although he played football in the street as a child in

Belfast, his size, strength and athleticism drew him towards Gaelic football and hurling.

His was a sporting family: his father was a competitive sprinter and his maternal grandfather, Joe Gallagher, was a renowned hurler for Antrim and a Gaelic footballer who helped to found the famous St John's Gaelic club. Gerry grew up with nine siblings, many of whom played sports to a high standard and looked up to their big brother.

Armstrong, whose large family was on the Catholic side of town, tells *FFT*, "You had to learn to take care of yourself, and I had to look after my brothers and sisters as well. At school I used to get into fights all the time – that was part of growing up in an area like the Falls Road. You'd be in a fight on the way to school and a fight on the way back – it was no big deal. It was rough and ready, but that was how the world was then."

Growing up in such an environment may explain why a young Armstrong thrived in Gaelic football. "I played Gaelic from the age of five, and I got to two Ulster finals and two under-21 All-Ireland semi-finals," he says, adding, "I loved Gaelic football – you could punch people, so it was right up my street!

"You'd never get sent off unless you did something really bad, which I did at 17 while playing in a minors final. I'd been in a fight on the previous Friday night and broken my knuckles. I had a plaster cast on, and when it came to the game I put a glove on so that no one could see it. There were two boys who were a bit tasty, kicking the s**t out of our lot, so I went over to have a go at them. One of them knocked me to the floor, so I stood up and instinctively threw a left hook – I broke his jaw in two places.

Above "Cheers for the assist, Billy... thank the keeper as well if you see him" **Below** Norn Iron were thwarted by a poor offside decision in their defeat to France

"I got a six-week suspension. As a result of that, I began playing soccer and never looked back. I'd played in the streets before but not 11-a-side, and I didn't really know what I was supposed to do. However, I was big, strong and quick, and a fast learner."

Armstrong continued to play Gaelic football and hurling as well as football, sometimes participating in three games a weekend. He soon made a name for himself as a prolific scorer, which attracted scouts from England.

"I was turning out for Bangor [in Northern Ireland]," reflects Armstrong. "The Tottenham manager, Terry Neill, came from Bangor and knew the club well, so he brought me over to London for a trial. I scored twice in a friendly against the RAF, trained with the first-team squad and thought it had gone pretty well. But when I returned to Belfast, I didn't hear anything for a month and thought it wasn't going to happen.

"Arsenal were also sniffing around and wanted to sign me. One day, I got a call from the Bangor chairman to say, 'Meet me at the back of City Hall – you'll be signing today'. I wondered whether it was Arsenal or Spurs, but didn't think to ask him!

"When we arrived at the Dunadry Hotel, there was Terry Neill waiting for me, and he said, 'Right, Big Man: sign this contract and you're coming to Tottenham'. It was 1975, I'd just turned 21 and I signed for Spurs on £65 per week."

Things didn't get off to the best of starts. "I'd never been down to London and they put me up in a hotel in Finsbury Park with Alfie Conn," says Armstrong. Conn, a flamboyant Scot who became a cult hero with his long hair and even longer sideburns, enjoyed London's nightlife, but it wasn't Armstrong's scene. "I just wanted to play and train," he says, "so eventually they put me in digs with a nice family and I felt much more settled."

Though the Ulsterman wasn't ready to play for the first team, he joined them for training and immediately encountered a 17-year-old prodigy soaring up the ranks. "The moment I saw Glenn Hoddle, I realised that he was ▸

"WE WERE A COMPLETE SIDE – NOBODY WANTED TO PLAY US. WE BEAT WEST GERMANY TWICE"

something special," Armstrong says now. "The things he could do with a ball, even at that age, were unbelievable. He could put it on a sixpence."

Hoddle and Armstrong were both in the Spurs first team by the beginning of the 1976-77 campaign, which was preceded by a disastrous world tour. Tottenham played in Canada against Eusebio's side, Toronto Metros-Croatia, before jetting to Los Angeles, Hawaii, Fiji, New Zealand and Australia, then home via Mumbai and Milan. "Looking back, it was a huge mistake," admits Armstrong. "That tour really took its toll on the players. We didn't start the season very well, there were a lot of young players thrown in and we ended up getting relegated. But at least I got to play a few games."

Y VIVA ESPANA

Armstrong spent five years with Tottenham, sometimes at centre-back, even as a full-back, until the frustration of not securing a regular spot in attack led to a transfer to Watford, who were rising up the divisions under a young Graham Taylor. The £250,000 fee was a club record and Armstrong repaid them with goals, as well as adding valuable experience to a young squad that was soon to include a teenager by the name of John Barnes. "Watford had a top youth setup and beat Manchester United to win the FA Youth Cup," reminisces Armstrong. "Barnes was an amazing player when he arrived."

When Watford earned promotion to the First Division for the first time in their history, Armstrong scored their first top-flight goal, two months after his heroics at the 1982 World Cup. The one regret he has from that period is that George Best, approaching the end of his career by then, didn't join him at the tournament. Armstrong had made his international bow alongside the Manchester United legend in 1977.

Top It proved to be a frustrating time at Spurs (when isn't it?) **Above** "Ref, can I celebrate yet?"

"YOU COULD PUNCH PEOPLE IN GAELIC FOOTBALL. IT WAS RIGHT UP MY STREET"

"It was against West Germany, the world champions at the time," he recounts. "Danny Blanchflower, the manager, told me the night before that I was going to play up front with George Best. I couldn't believe it.

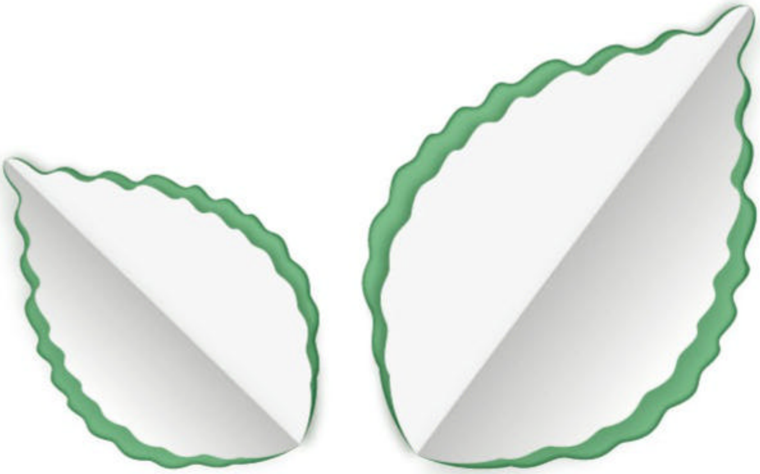
"For a two or three-year spell, George was the best footballer in the world. If he'd had the protection that players like Neymar and [Lionel] Messi get now, George would have been incredible, but he played in a different era and got lumps kicked out of him. I know he had thrombosis in both legs at the end of his career and could hardly walk, but he was unstoppable at his peak. In training, he used to nutmeg you for fun – he'd play one-twos off your shins and go past you. He scored so many, too. I think it was four or five seasons in a row at Manchester United that he scored 20-plus goals. He was a winger who scored 20 goals every season – who else does that?

"He had it all. He was the complete player. I later faced Diego Maradona, the best I ever played against, but George was the best I ever played with. I'd love to have seen him play at the World Cup with us in 1982, to watch what he would have done on that stage. There was talk of picking him even though he was past his prime, but instead Billy Bingham handed a chance to Norman Whiteside, who was just breaking through at [Manchester] United. Norman broke Pele's record as the youngest player to appear at the World Cup."

While Armstrong instantly became a hero in Northern Ireland for his winner against La Roja, he also became notorious in Spain and was offered a contract at Real Mallorca, where he stayed for two happy campaigns. He even returned for a match at Valencia's Mestalla, overcoming grief from the home fans and scoring in the same net as before.

"There'd been interest a year earlier from a few overseas clubs," reveals Armstrong of his switch to Mallorca. "Then at the end of the 1982-83 season, I thought, 'Why not?' It turned out to be a great move for me. I had a fantastic time, learned the language and ended up working as a commentator when my playing days were over."

A familiar voice as Sky's co-commentator for their La Liga coverage during the league's peak years, Armstrong recently embarked on another venture: producing his own brand of whiskey named 'The Spirit of '82'. It couldn't have been called anything else. On that night in Valencia at the World Cup, Gerry Armstrong well and truly lived up to his moniker. The Big Man, for the big occasion.



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MR NICE GUY

Four years before Sir Jim Ratcliffe threw his hat into the ring to buy Manchester United, the billionaire acquired French outfit Nice. Via Aaron Ramsey, Ross Barkley, Sir Dave Brailsford and a porn star, it's led to mixed results

Words Julien Laurens

Nice got some great news in early April. Three months into his reign as the club's manager, Didier Digard was selected as one of 10 people to embark upon French football's highest coaching diploma, the BEPF. It will save Sir Jim Ratcliffe, Nice's owner and Britain's richest person, €25,000 per match.

That's the fee the club have had to shell out since early January, every time former Middlesbrough midfielder Digard has taken charge of Nice without the requisite coaching badges. Fellow Ligue 1 outfit Reims have had to cough up the same, after hiring part-British boss Will Still. For Ratcliffe, the fee had been worth it – the 36-year-old Digard led Nice to a 12-game unbeaten run in his first dozen league outings since being promoted from reserve team gaffer.

Yet since Ratcliffe sealed his €100 million purchase of Nice in the summer of 2019, things haven't always been straightforward... ▸

SEND FOR SIR DAVE

Les Aiglons (The Eaglets) had just finished seventh in France's top tier when the Greater Manchester-born billionaire completed his takeover. In 2017, they'd come third in the first campaign under their previous owners, a Chinese-American consortium. Mario Balotelli had arrived from Liverpool, hitting 17 goals under Swiss boss Lucien Favre to earn them a place in the Champions League qualifying rounds. They knocked out Ajax before succumbing to Napoli.

By the time Ratcliffe bought Nice in 2019, Favre had left for Borussia Dortmund, to be replaced by Patrick Vieira. Four more coaches have followed since then, and the upheaval hasn't stopped there – restructuring the club has proved to be Ratcliffe's biggest challenge, as he's attempted to get the right people in the right roles to bring success.

Nice is another level to Lausanne, the other football club owned by Ratcliffe's chemicals company Ineos, who also have a key stake in the Mercedes Formula 1 racing team, and are involved in cycling and America's Cup sailing. Not only that, they've provided backing for the New Zealand rugby union team and even the first sub-two-hour marathon, achieved by Kenyan Eliud Kipchoge in 2019.

The new regime's takeover was finalised in December 2017 and Lausanne's first signing was Zinedine Zidane's son Enzo, but the Swiss side dropped into the second tier and a return to the top flight lasted only two seasons.

On the French Riviera, competition is even fiercer. Ratcliffe lives in Monaco, a few miles down the road, but probably didn't realise when he bought the club just how difficult it would be to gain the region's bragging rights. The area is crazy about sport – Monaco and Marseille are footballing rivals, then there's Toulon in rugby, Monaco in basketball, Aix in handball... the list goes on. Attracting fans, sponsors and young talent isn't easy with so many other alternatives, so the structure at Nice was always going to be pivotal.

Often a new owner likes to hire their own people in crucial roles, and so it proved. Bob Ratcliffe, Jim's brother, became CEO, but has since departed. The club's former president Jean-Pierre Rivere was brought back, as was sporting director Julien Fournier. Both had exited months ahead of the takeover, amid disagreements with the previous owners.

They were smart decisions: Rivere is well-connected and highly respected in French football, had a long affiliation with the club and remained popular with fans. Fournier had previously done a fine job with player recruitment, as well as overseeing the club's new training ground. After Fournier left again last year, later joining Parma, Nice poached Florent Ghisolfi, one of Ligue 1's best sporting directors, from Lens.

Sir Dave Brailsford's December 2021 arrival – almost as an unofficial sporting director and CEO – was more unexpected, but very much a Ratcliffe move. The 59-year-old won fame as the head honcho of the highly successful Sky cycling team, later to become the Ineos Grenadiers, but had no football background. In cycling, he was regarded as a genius, with a marginal gains philosophy that delivered stunning results. In football, he was a novice.

By that stage, Nice's first two full seasons under Ratcliffe's tenure had seen them finish fifth and ninth in Ligue 1. Ratcliffe pushed Brailsford's remit quite far, asking him to do an audit of the club to optimise its resources and get better results.

"As director of sport at Ineos, my job is to create a synergy between the six sports represented in the group," Brailsford said in local newspaper *Nice-Matin* in 2022, the only interview he's given while at the club. "Nice was a bit behind the other teams we have. We were keen to integrate it into the Ineos galaxy to work closely with the other teams and see how we could improve the club."

Brailsford highlighted the ambitions of Ratcliffe, Ineos and Nice. "After three years, we had to open a second chapter," he said. "Ineos invests in teams to get better, not to stagnate. It's fundamental to be ambitious. If owners don't believe, how can players and supporters? Winning isn't only reserved for Paris Saint-Germain or Manchester City. Leicester in the Premier League and Lille in Ligue 1 showed that everything is possible.

"To become successful, we want to create a team where each player and staff member gives the maximum to enable the team to thrive. If we can be the best in recruitment, medical and recovery, then we'll have great results on the pitch."

That's the method Ratcliffe also applies to business, making him one of the richest men in the world. "Jim is a great person and a real football fan," said Brailsford. "He's won in his life, he's taken risks. If you ask him to pick between an attacking team or a defensive one, he'll always pick the attacking one. He works hard and loves running. Bringing him some fun with football would be great."

Ratcliffe's ambition was clear when he convinced PSG CEO Jean-Claude Blanc to join Ineos, working alongside Brailsford at Nice and across the company's sports teams. Also a former Juventus CEO, Blanc knows sport and business inside out.

"Sir Jim always wants to hire the very best people in every position and job, whether that's at Ineos or in one of the sports he's invested in," says Fournier, now looking for his next project after leaving Parma. "He wants excellence at every level to reach his goals. It doesn't matter how much it costs or what it takes. He's really good at getting the best out of people. He's demanding but fair."

MOODY BLUES

You'll rarely find someone who worked with Ratcliffe with anything negative to say about him. He's tough, for sure, but people say he's inspirational and motivational, too. He hasn't always been visible in person at Nice since he bought the club, but his presence has been felt, right from day one.

Ratcliffe has spent in the region of £210m on transfers since his takeover, under three sporting directors: Iain Moody, once Malky Mackay's head of recruitment at Cardiff, took on the role temporarily between Fournier's exit and Ghisolfi's arrival. In the owner's first summer, Nice spent £18m on Ajax's highly-rated striker Kasper Dolberg and have largely continued to go for younger players.

Some supporters hoped that the Ratcliffe era would lead to the club splashing the cash on big names, but that didn't happen until last summer. Moody veered from their usual transfer policy, bringing in a plethora of former Premier League players including Kasper Schmeichel, Ross Barkley and Aaron Ramsey, also loaning Nicolas Pepe from Arsenal and Joe Bryan from Fulham. Under the current ownership, the highest transfer fee agreed for a single player has been £20m,

Clockwise from right Ramsey has struggled; as has Barkley; Nice and hot atmosphere; Ratcliffe, Tour de France champion Chris Froome and Brailsford; Sir Dave is trying to create synergy between Ineos' six sports

INEOS
PINARELLO

rising to £26.5m with potential bonuses, to sign up-and-coming Nigerian forward Terem Moffi from Lorient.

When it comes to transfers, as with on-field tactics, Ratcliffe's policy is to stay away. He's made money available, but that has been it. "He'd never interfere with my work," ex-boss Vieira tells *FFT*. "We'd talk about football when we met, about the team and our lives, but he's not an owner who will get involved too much and prevent the manager from doing his job. His ambitions and expectations are high, so you know where you stand, but you can do your job freely."

Appointed as manager a year before the takeover in June 2018, following a stint in charge of New York City, Vieira's first season under Ratcliffe was pretty promising – Nice produced some bold performances, climbing two places in the standings to fifth from the previous campaign. Things appeared to be on the up and hopes were high for 2020-21, with the aim to break into the top three and reach the Champions League.

The opening few weeks of the season were good, but then results worsened - Nice were well on their way to finishing bottom of their Europa League group, and sat 11th in Ligue 1, when Vieira was dismissed in the December. While the players liked the manager, the fans weren't quite as convinced, and the decision seemed inevitable when it eventually came.

"Sir Jim will let you work, but he doesn't want to waste his money either," explains a former close colleague at the club, who prefers to remain anonymous. "If he sees that the team isn't improving, that things aren't moving forward, then he'll take big decisions. He's ruthless when he has to be – even if others are running the club on a daily basis, he's the one with the final word.

"He'll never rush a big decision like sacking a manager, though. He prefers stability in sports, just like in business. He would have discussed letting a boss go with the people around him, and weighed all the pros and cons. He would only make the call when he felt that it was necessary."

Vieira was Ratcliffe's first 'victim' at Nice. In football, choosing the right manager at the right time makes a massive difference, and Ratcliffe has sometimes learned that the hard way. With hindsight, was it right to part ways with the former Arsenal skipper at that particular moment? Probably not. Vieira's assistant Adrian Ursea was placed in charge until the campaign's end, but the Romanian won only three of his first 15 league games. Nice even flirted with a potential relegation battle, before some improved end-of-season form saw them climb to a still-disappointing ninth. They'd taken a huge step backwards.

To get the project back on track, Ratcliffe needed to make a statement and show his ▸

"RATCLIFFE WANTS EXCELLENCE AT EVERY LEVEL – THE COST DOESN'T MATTER"

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Above "We're just glad not to be in the toilets, to be honest with you..."

hand. If he really wanted to see Nice at the top of the table, he required the best coach available. Who better, then, than the man who'd just won the Ligue 1 title with Lille?

THE QUEST FOR POCH

Christophe Galtier was the standout name on Ineos' shortlist in the summer of 2021 – his shock triumph over PSG was everything Ratcliffe wanted Nice to do. "If Lille can do it, so can we," he told his close entourage that summer, even though Nice haven't won the domestic league since 1959. Ratcliffe had to fight for Galtier amid fierce competition from Napoli and Lyon, but felt it was worth it. With the reigning French champion in the dugout, the club had a chance to build something.

Nice challenged for the Champions League for most of the 2021-22 campaign, but their spring inconsistency meant a fifth-placed finish and the Europa Conference League instead. Les Aiglons would have taken fourth and a Europa League spot, had they not been deducted a point for crowd trouble during a home game against Marseille.

Seeking a first major trophy since 1997, they reached the Coupe de France final but surprisingly lost to Nantes. Ratcliffe was at the Stade de France and the 1-0 defeat left a sour taste – he'd never been so close to his first silverware as an owner, yet his team disappointed him. A few weeks later, when Galtier was offered the opportunity to take over at PSG, Ratcliffe was happy to grab the financial compensation and run.

Returning for a second spell came Lucien Favre, but it proved to be one of the Ratcliffe era's biggest mistakes. The Swiss was Rivere's choice – the duo had worked well together in the past – and Ratcliffe opted not to interfere.

This time, however, the manager's ideas didn't fit with the players at his disposal, the first 17 Ligue 1 games of this season yielding just five victories. Ramsey, Barkley and Bryan rarely started matches, while Ramsey also returned to training late after the World Cup in December, crushed by the disappointment of Wales' poor showing in Qatar.

Ineos had been ready to dismiss Favre as early as September, when Brailsford and Ratcliffe spoke to Mauricio Pochettino over a possible appointment. Pochettino rejected the offer and Favre stayed on, but there was only going to be one outcome. After Nice embarrassingly lost to third-tier side Le Puy Foot 43 Auvergne in the last 64 of the Coupe de France in January, Favre was sacked, with Les Aiglons 11th in the table. The club even had to contend with a scandal when a porn star surreptitiously filmed an X-rated movie in the Allianz Riviera toilets, midway through a home game against Lille.

Digard's promotion from reserve-team boss turned things around on the field – that long unbeaten run lifted Nice back to eighth in the table by April, as they also reached the Europa Conference League's latter stages. Yet Ratcliffe's Manchester United takeover bid has once again muddied the waters. If (and it's a big if) he's successful, Ratcliffe may have to sell up or reshuffle Nice's management structure in a way similar to RB Leipzig and Red Bull Salzburg in 2017. UEFA rules forbid two clubs owned by the same person or group from playing in the same competition.

Who knows what the future may hold, but Ratcliffe's vision when he first bought Nice in 2019 – ushering the club into the French elite – has yet to come to fruition. "Ineos invests in teams to get better, not to stagnate," was how Brailsford put it. In their first four years in charge, there's been too much stagnation and not enough progress.

RATCLIFFE'S VISION HAS YET TO COME TO FRUITION. TOO MUCH STAGNATION, NOT ENOUGH PROGRESS

#SNAPDRAGON INTHEGAME

Below Ratcliffe is part of a takeover bid at his boyhood club Man United

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THE FORTY CLUB

It's bloody hard to score 40 league goals in a season – a lifetime has passed since anybody did it in an English top-tier campaign – so Erling Haaland, Manchester City's goal monster, may soon join an exclusive club. Meet its members, from mono-balled Dixie to Old Big 'Ed himself...

Words
Harry Pearson

Since the formation of the Football League in 1888, just 38 players have reached the remarkable milestone of plundering 40 English league goals in a single season. As *FourFourTwo* goes to press, Erling Haaland is bidding to become No.39, which would make him – incredibly – only the third person in the past 50 years to achieve the spectacular feat.

What's more, neither of those two most recent goal-getters did it at the top level. Haaland, just 22 and in his debut season in the league, would be only the second player since the Second World War to register 40-plus efforts in an English top-flight campaign. Even true greats such as Gary Lineker and Thierry Henry never managed more than 30, and the modern-day Premier League record is shared by Andy Cole and Alan Shearer with 'just' 34 (Mohamed Salah's 32 being the most in the 38-game era post-1995).

The list of those who did shatter the 40-goal barrier has legendary figures rubbing shoulders with lower-division heroes barely known beyond a 30-mile radius of their home grounds. Each one is special, from the first (Jimmy Cookson in the 1925-26 Division Three North, the Chesterfield centre-forward smashing No.40 just before Blackburn's Ted Harper did likewise up in Division One) to the last (Fulham's Aleksandar Mitrovic in 2021-22).

The timing of Cookson and Harper's 40+ campaigns was not coincidental. The impetus for goal-scoring sparked in the summer of 1925 with a revision to Law 11 in the Laws of the Game: the offside rule. Prior to that, there always had to be three defenders between the attacker and the goal when the ball was played to them. This regulation was ruthlessly exploited by defenders after the First World War; most notably, Bill McCracken, a Northern Irish full-back with Newcastle, perfected an offside trap that snared forwards like a web catching flies. Countless defences soon copied his example. Goals dwindled, attendances dropped, football authorities panicked and the new law – just two defenders between attacker and goal – came into force for the 1925-26 season.

The change was instant and dramatic. Goals in the English top flight increased from 1,192 in 1924-25 to 1,703 a season later; from an average of 2.58 per match to a crowd-swelling 3.89. Until then, the largest haul in an English league season had been 39 goals by Darlington's David Brown, of Scotland. Such totals suddenly became commonplace in the period.

The 40-goal-season strikers had arrived.

DIXIE DEAN

William 'Dixie' Dean was the epitome of the rugged British centre-forward: strong as a rhino, and often playing like one.

If you want to know how rough the game was in Dixie's era, consider this: playing in a reserves match for Tranmere when he was 16, Dean was challenged so ferociously that he lost a testicle. He just laughed it off (not literally). Still, that wasn't so surprising. After all, this was a lad who had voluntarily gone to Borstal at the age of 11 because the football facilities in the school for young delinquents were the best in Birkenhead; "I told the other lads that I'd got done for stealing, so I fitted in," he later recalled.

Dean had jet-black hair, a dark complexion and a wide, toothy grin. Contrary to a popular myth, his nickname seems to have been the corruption of a childhood tag, 'Digsy', rather than an allusion to the Confederate states of the American South. His strapping torso was set atop a pair of legs that might have been carved from tree trunks, giving him a powerful shot that Dean reputedly honed by kicking giant rats against a wall during night shifts as an apprentice fitter. It was his heading, though, that drew gasps from fans, team-mates and opponents. The well-built centre-forward had a vertical leap so forceful it suggested rocket boots. Then he hung in the air, majestically, before thumping the ball so percussively with his bonce that Everton supporters joked he had steel in his forehead.

Dean joined Everton – his boyhood idols – from Tranmere for £3,000 in March 1925. His career was almost curtailed in the summer of 1926 by a motorcycle smash that brought him a fractured skull and broken jaw; doctors feared he'd never play again, but experience had given Dean real testicular fortitude.

While his 1927-28 season started steadily enough, it was on October 8 that he hinted of things to come, by hammering home all five Everton goals as they thrashed Manchester United 5-2 at Goodison Park. It was the first of five hat-tricks he'd score in the campaign.

The previous season, Middlesbrough's George Camsell had struck 59 goals in the Second Division, a record so astounding people thought it would last forever. With three matches remaining – and having also missed three through injury – Dean was still eight short. But then he scored twice against Aston Villa. Then he rattled four past Burnley. Everton's closing encounter was at home to Arsenal: when Dean found the net twice in the opening six minutes to equal Camsell's tally, a new record looked inevitable. Yet time ticked by. Finally, with eight minutes left, he headed in Alex Troup's cross for Dixie's sixty.

Dean was still only 21. Though he'd never match 60 again, and nor will anybody else, his 44 goals in 1931-32 made him the only man to score 40-plus twice in the English top division. Bill Shankly said of him: "He belongs to the company of the supremely great, like Beethoven, Shakespeare and Rembrandt".

Dean believed that only Jesus Christ was capable of breaking his 60-goal record. The Saviour may have had many talents, but he was far less dangerous from crosses. ▸

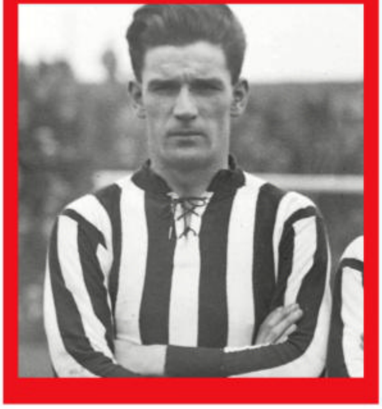
Below Beethoven, Shakespeare and Rembrandt never looked this cool

THE TWENTIES

Ted Harper was the first to break the 40-goal barrier in Division One. He held the top-flight season scoring record for a whole year until Dixie Dean came by.

In between, George Camsell became the first of just five players in any English tier to hit a half-century of goals, totalling 59 despite missing Middlesbrough's first four games. Then, David Halliday – also the fastest to 100 goals in the English top tier, at least until Haaland does it in fewer than 101 games – became the second and last player to be outright top scorer in Scotland and England, by repeating his Dundee feat at Sunderland in 1928-29.

That season was fruitful for forwards – one in each tier struck 40. A whistlestop tour: in Division Two, Jimmy Hampson of Blackpool did it back-to-back before he died falling off a yacht; Jimmy McConnell, formerly of the Springfield Babes in the USA, was Carlisle's hero in Division Three North; and Luton's short-tempered Andy 'Ratty' Rennie hit 43 goals in the South.



Below left 100 goals in just 101 appearances for Happy Halliday **Below** Drake's speed was even more impressive if you consider the drag created by those shorts

TED DRAKE

Like another iconic Arsenal marksman, Ian Wright, Ted Drake had an unconventional path to greatness. The Southampton-born striker was rejected by Tottenham after a trial and got a job inspecting gas meters.

Drake was later spotted in non-league, at Winchester City, and Saints took him to the Second Division in 1931. He was an instant success, and in 1934 he joined Arsenal for £6,500 having rebuffed a previous approach.

The Gunners were a superb side, managed by George Allison – formerly a commentator – after Herbert Chapman's sudden death in January 1934 and marshalled by the brilliant, baggy-shorted, Scottish playmaker Alex James, with the graceful Cliff Bastin scoring freely from the wing. Their broad-shouldered new signing lacked the flair and guile of his celebrated team-mates, but made up for it with speed, vigour and determination. Drake was cheery and positive, and also seemed to be impervious to pain. In 1938, he carried on playing against Brentford with a broken wrist and eight stitches in a head wound that had required him to be carried off unconscious.

Quick and direct, Drake was imperious in the air and had a thunderous shot on either foot. He took a simple approach to the game: when he got the ball, he tried to whack it into the net. It proved to be a prosperous formula. In 1934-35 – his first full season at Highbury – the centre-forward helped the Gunners to a third successive league title by racking up some phenomenal numbers in the first half of the campaign. In November he fired four goals in a game in successive weeks, after already registering three other hat-tricks. By the start of December, Drake was averaging just under 1.5 goals per game and there was talk of Dixie Dean's record being in jeopardy. He promptly tailed off, however, and ended the season with 42 goals from 41 games.

The following term, Drake notched seven times in an Arsenal win away at Aston Villa – still a division record. He'd score 139 goals for Arsenal before war brought the curtain down on his career when he was still at his peak. In the 1950s he'd manage Chelsea to their first league title, bringing through a crop of young talents. One of them was Jimmy Greaves...

HONOURS' LIST

No place here for Rushie, Rooney nor Ronnie – just the 40-goal-season wonders, with a surprising number called Ted

1926	Ted Harper (Blackburn)	**43**	Div 1
1926	Jimmy Cookson (Chesterfield)	**44**	Div 3 (North)
1927	George Camsell (Middlesbrough)	**59**	Div 2
1927	Albert Whitehurst (Rochdale)	**44**	Div 3 (North)
1927	David Morris (Swindon)	**47**	Div 3 (South)
1928	Dixie Dean (Everton)	**60**	Div 1
1929	David Halliday (Sunderland)	**43**	Div 1
1929	Jimmy Hampson (Blackpool)	**40**	Div 2
1929	Jimmy McConnell (Carlisle)	**42**	Div 3 (North)
1929	Andrew Rennie (Luton)	**43**	Div 3 (South)
1930	Jimmy Hampson (Blackpool)	**45**	Div 2
1931	Pongo Waring (Aston Villa)	**49**	Div 1
1931	Jimmy Dunne (Sheffield United)	**41**	Div 1
1931	Peter Simpson (Crystal Palace)	**46**	Div 3 (South)
1932	Dixie Dean (Everton)	**44**	Div 1
1932	Allan Hall (Lincoln)	**42**	Div 3 (North)
1932	Clarrie Bourton (Coventry)	**49**	Div 3 (South)
1932	Frank Newton (Fulham)	**43**	Div 3 (South)
1933	Clarrie Bourton (Coventry)	**40**	Div 3 (South)
1934	Pat Glover (Grimsby)	**42**	Div 2

JOHN CHARLES

Built like a comic strip strongman, 6ft 3in Welshman John Charles was a man of intimidating stature. "He was just so dominatingly *big*", English full-back Jimmy Armfield recalled with a touch of awe.

People couldn't help noticing his size, but there was more to the Swansea giant than 14 stones of finely-honed musculature. Charles was nimble, quick, with good feet. A neat and clever passer of the ball, he read the game wonderfully, reacted fast and was so calm that he seemed to exist in his own pocket of time. That he was magnificent in the air goes without saying: so great was his power, it was said that he could head a ball further than many could kick one. Charles' very presence lifted his team-mates. Jack Charlton, who played alongside him at Leeds, considered him the most effective player he ever encountered – "a team unto himself". Reporters tended to agree. The big man had such a massive influence at Elland Road, they began to call Leeds 'John Charles United'.

Charles had commenced his career at his hometown club, then relocated to Leeds as a 17-year-old. They were managed by an eccentric, one Major Frank Buckley, who gave his players ballroom dancing lessons and massages using whisky. Buckley played the young Charles at right-back and on the left side of midfield before eventually sticking him into the centre of the backline, where he was effective to the point that many seasoned pros soon deemed the towering teenager to be the finest centre-half in Britain.

It was only after the collosus returned from National Service in 1952 that Leeds, now coached by one of England's top forwards in Raich Carter, encouraged the Welshman to go up front. It was an inspired decision.

The 1953-54 Second Division season saw Charles go off like an atom bomb. He scored eight times in the opening three fixtures, including a hat-trick against Rotherham and four in Leeds' 6-0 demolition of Notts County. The run continued. As Christmas neared, Charles completed another hat-trick against the hapless Rotherham – his third against them in six matches. He'd nabbed his 30th goal of the campaign by the first week of January. Things slowed a little after that as heavy pitches and niggling injuries took their toll, but Charles finished the season with 42 in 39 matches as the Lilywhites came 10th. He then went close to matching that tally during Leeds' 1956-57 top-tier term, striking 38 times in 40 appearances.

The goals secured Charles a life-changing move to Juventus, where he hit 97 goals in 160 league games. He was never booked nor sent off in his career, and nobody had a bad word to say about him. *And* he could sing. ►

JACK CHARLTON CALLED JOHN CHARLES "A TEAM UNTO HIMSELF", SUCH WAS HIS HUGE INFLUENCE

1934 Alf Lythgoe (Stockport)	**46**	Div 3 (North)
1934 Tommy Bamford (Wrexham)	**44**	Div 3 (North)
1935 Ted Drake (Arsenal)	**42**	Div 1
1937 Ted Hartson (Mansfield)	**55**	Div 3 (North)
1937 Joe Payne (Luton)	**55**	Div 3 (South)
1947 Clarrie Jordan (Doncaster)	**41**	Div 3 (North)
1952 Derek Dooley (Sheffield Wednesday)	**46**	Div 2
1954 John Charles (Leeds)	**42**	Div 2
1956 Ron Collins (Torquay)	**40**	Div 3 (South)
1957 Arthur Rowley (Leicester)	**44**	Div 2
1957 Ted Phillips (Ipswich)	**42**	Div 3 (South)
1958 Tommy Johnston (L Orient, Blackburn)	**43**	Div 2
1959 Brian Clough (Middlesbrough)	**42**	Div 2
1960 Cliff Holton (Watford)	**42**	Div 4
1961 Jimmy Greaves (Chelsea)	**41**	Div 1
1961 Terry Bly (Peterborough)	**52**	Div 4
1962 Roger Hunt (Liverpool)	**41**	Div 2
1966 Kevin Hector (Bradford PA)	**44**	Div 4
1971 Ted MacDougall (Bournemouth)	**42**	Div 4
1993 Guy Whittingham (Portsmouth)	**42**	Div 1 (new)
2022 Aleksandar Mitrovic (Fulham)	**43**	Championship

THE THIRTIES

Spare a little thought for Jimmy Dunne, Frank Newton and Tommy Bamford. The trio walloped 41, 43 and 44 goals respectively, yet still weren't divisional top scorers in this prolific decade.

Even with a record tally for an Irishman, Dunne couldn't top Tom 'Pongo' Waring of Aston Villa, who showed that Dixie Dean wasn't Birkenhead's only footballing phenomenon. Dean's own remarkable record looked under threat from Waring, who, by all accounts, rarely bothered to train and drank enormous quantities… of lemonade. 'Pongo' scored four goals on 1930-31's opening day and had 28 from 22 games but, slowed by injury, he ended up one short of 50 and 11 short of Dixie.

A year later, Fulham's Newton lost out to Coventry's Clarrie Bourton in Division Three South; Bourton then repeated the feat, as one of just three players to bag 40-plus league goals not once but twice. Finally, Wrexham's Bamford was second to Stockport's Alf Lythgoe, foreshadowing the 2021-22 National League. Sort of.

Below left Pongo: better than the nickname implies **Below** Cloughie? Difficult? Surely not **Right** "Greavsie's hogging the balls in training again"

BRIAN CLOUGH

George Camsell's 59 league goals in the 1926-27 season is the second-best tally in history, so you'd trust his scouting report rejecting a young striker. Fortunately, Ray Grant didn't, and Middlesbrough's youth coach signed Brian Clough anyway in 1955 from a village side, Great Broughton, who were managed by the local postwoman.

Young Big 'Ed had sharp features beneath a Woody Woodpecker quiff and skin so pale it made the moon look like Donald Trump. He had great positional sense and anticipation, and could volley thunderously using either foot. His record for Boro was ridiculous: across five full campaigns in an unimpressive outfit, his lowest league tally was 34.

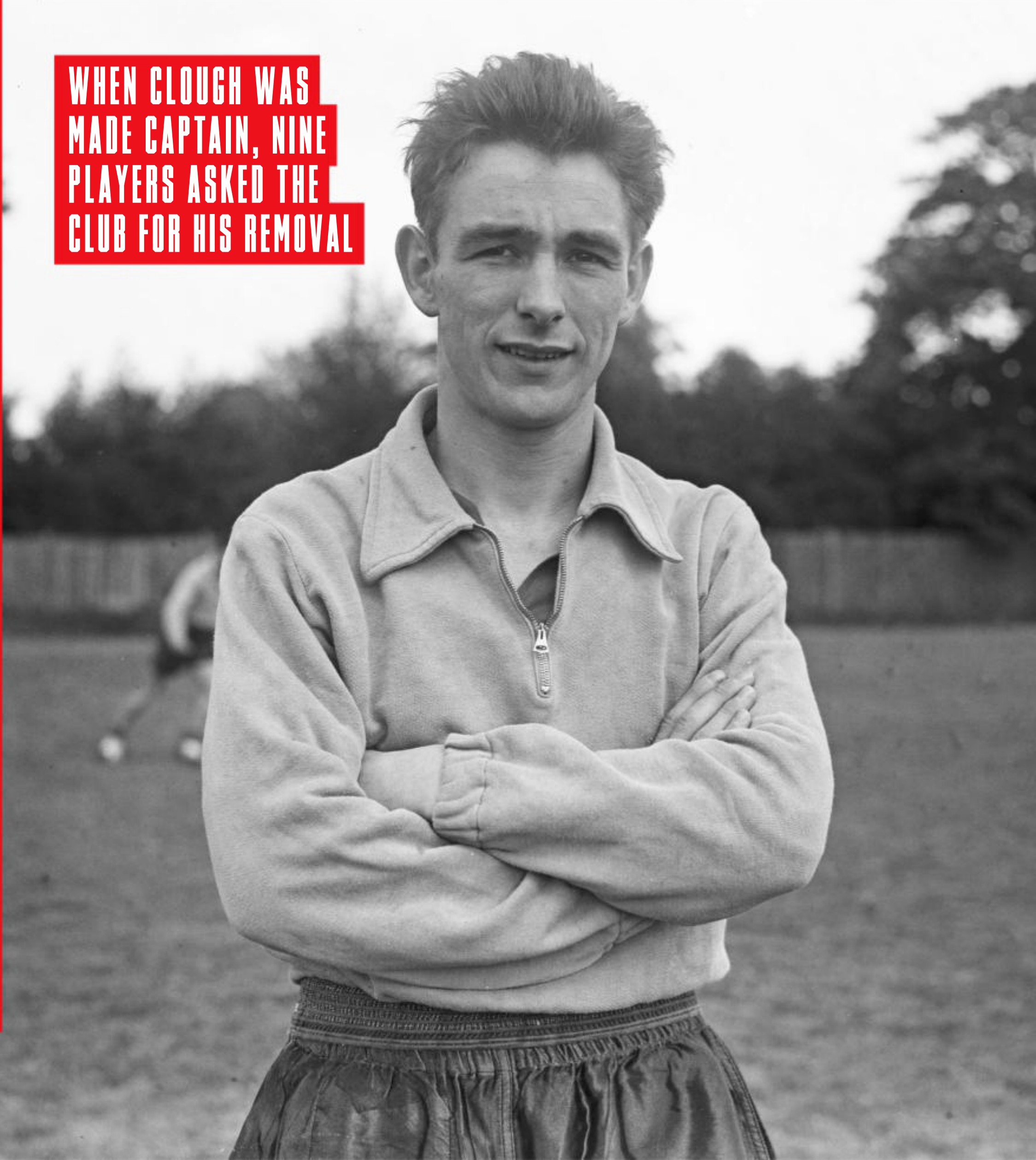
Yet Clough was never popular. His quest for goals was so single-minded, it was said he'd shove better-placed team-mates out of the way to score. He refused to make runs taking him away from the penalty area, criticised others on the pitch and sulked after defeats.

Called arrogant, scathing and combative, Clough hit back. Boro were mired in Second Division mediocrity and he wondered if some of the club's old pros didn't prefer it that way, betting on themselves to lose to safeguard their earnings. Accusations led to fisticuffs, and when Clough was appointed captain in 1958, nine players signed a letter to directors asking for his removal. Fans took the majority view and, in the next home game, barracked their new skipper. He responded by scoring a hat-trick of shots from outside the box. This uncrushable self-belief would become clear during his career as a manager.

Clough's greatest season, 1958-59, came in these venomous surroundings. After getting off to a flyer with five goals in a 9-0 hiding of Brighton, he'd scored 13 after eight matches and 25 as of Boxing Day, including hat-tricks against Scunthorpe, Swansea and Brighton (again). He finished on 43; Boro finished 13th.

Clough requested a transfer every summer without fail, and having clocked up 204 goals in 222 matches, he left Boro for Sunderland in 1961. The £55,000 man bagged 29 league goals in his maiden campaign and had 24 by December in 1962-63, on course to surpass his best tally at Ayresome Park, but a collision with Bury's goalkeeper wrecked his knee and ended his career. His playing career, anyway…

WHEN CLOUGH WAS MADE CAPTAIN, NINE PLAYERS ASKED THE CLUB FOR HIS REMOVAL



JIMMY GREAVES

The embodiment of the new self-confident, working-class kids who would come to dominate British culture in the '60s, Jimmy Greaves was a Ray Davies of an inside forward; David Bailey in football boots. He had a smart haircut and a smarter wit, and with his flair as a striker accompanying his cheeky-geezer persona (broad grin, half-time fag, big nights "up west"), he proved a fans' favourite wherever he played.

'Greavsie' was a sensation. Sprightly and elegant, he'd glide over rutted, muddy turf as if on a cushion of air. He was also hard to knock off the ball, and could beat defenders with a body swerve or breeze past them using his swift footwork. Most of all, he was lethal in the penalty area and dangerous from the edge of it; his powerful left-footed shot was notable for a near-total lack of backlift, which meant goalkeepers couldn't set themselves.

Signed as a junior by Chelsea in 1956, he'd cracked home 114 goals for the youth team before Ted Drake handed the 17-year-old his first-team debut in 1957-58's curtain-raiser. He scored, of course, turning in a dazzling performance that Charles Buchan, of *Charles Buchan's Football Monthly*, rated as the finest debut he'd ever seen. It was a sign of things to come. When Greaves smashed a hat-trick to sink Manchester City in November 1960, it took him to 100 league goals. He was 20.

That 1960-61 season would be the most productive of Greaves' career. It would be his last at Stamford Bridge too, as Chelsea, in need of a rebuild, sold him to Milan against his wishes. In his farewell outing, at home to Nottingham Forest, the Blues' captain for the day added fuel to the fans' ire by scoring all four goals in a 4-3 victory, a last-minute winner taking his season tally to 41. He is, for the moment, still the last player to break the 40-goal barrier in England's top division.

Returning to England after unhappy times in Italy, he settled at White Hart Lane with a hat-trick on his debut. He was the league's top scorer three years running at Spurs, and twice came close to netting 40 once again.

For England, Greaves hit 44 goals in just 57 caps, but his needling of Alf Ramsey (Greaves tormented Ramsey by whistling *What's It All About, Alfie?* when he entered the dressing room, and wisecracked about the manager's strangulated attempts to speak like an army officer) meant his final international fixture occurred when he was only 27, after already missing the knockout stages in his country's World Cup triumph. Exile from the England team blighted his later career, and was likely a factor in his future struggles with alcohol, yet Greaves' club legacy remains. His record of 357 top-flight goals – some 150 more than Harry Kane to date – may never be broken.

THE FORTIES AND FIFTIES

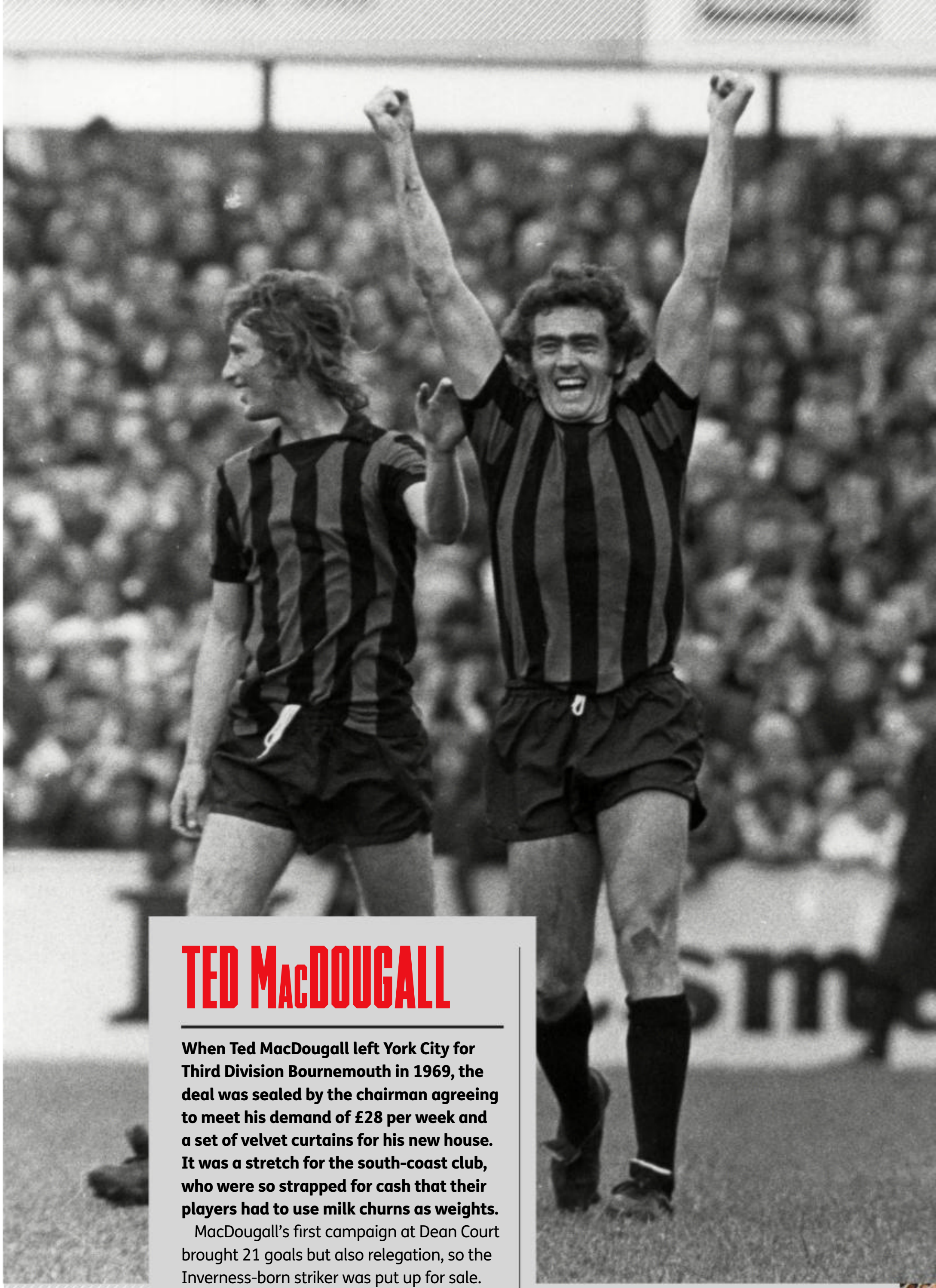
When league football recommenced in 1946-47 after a slightly unavoidable hiatus, goals were harder to come by.

Nobody in the top flight topped 40 in the '40s, as Clarrie Jordan alone reached the landmark for third-tier Doncaster. His feat of scoring in 10 successive league matches, in the first post-war season, has been repeated just four times in England.

The '50s were more fun. Derek Dooley, a galloping bull of a centre-forward, bludgeoned 46 Second Division goals for Sheffield Wednesday in 1951-52. Sadly, his career ended the very next season, as a broken leg turned gangrenous and had to be amputated when he was 23.

Tommy Johnston, meanwhile, had lost the use of one arm in a mining accident, which at least didn't preclude him from playing professional football. The Scot is the only player to spread 40-plus goals across two clubs in one campaign, for Leyton Orient and Blackburn in 1957-58.

The more memorable record, however, belongs to Arthur 'The Gunner' Rowley, who fired 44 for Leicester in 1956-57. With 434, Rowley is, quite simply, English football's all-time top league goalscorer.



Left Rowley is the man to beat **Above** A very proud winner of the Susan Boyle lookalike contest (Bournemouth & Poole edition)

TED MacDOUGALL

When Ted MacDougall left York City for Third Division Bournemouth in 1969, the deal was sealed by the chairman agreeing to meet his demand of £28 per week and a set of velvet curtains for his new house. It was a stretch for the south-coast club, who were so strapped for cash that their players had to use milk churns as weights.

MacDougall's first campaign at Dean Court brought 21 goals but also relegation, so the Inverness-born striker was put up for sale. Nobody wanted him. Bournemouth's new boss, former West Ham defender John Bond, didn't fancy the curly-haired No.9 much, either. Bond prized adaptability. The Scot was a classic goal-hanger. Inside the box, he was lethal; outside it, he was a beached shark.

With no money to spend, Bond made the best of what he had. Over the summer, he taught MacDougall how to find space and drummed into him that a forward of his size and shape – 5ft 10in and slight of build – had to make near-post runs rather than battle in the middle with elbow-happy centre-backs.

Initially suspicious, MacDougall was soon converted. Results were immediate. In the first seven matches of the 1970-71 season, he struck eight times. In the Cherries' next home game against Colchester, he hit all of his team's goals in a 4-1 victory. Fans began to call him 'Supermac' (Malcolm Macdonald, the forward who would become Supermac, was playing for fourth-tier Luton and miles behind MacDougall in the scoring standings).

Scouts started to show up, and Joe Mercer's Manchester City were rumoured to have bid £70,000 for him. MacDougall's clever flicks and blindside runs even drew comparisons with England World Cup winner Martin Peters.

In December 1970, Bournemouth reunited MacDougall and his old York pal, Phil Boyer – the double act duly formed one of the 1970s' classic smash-and-grab strike partnerships: Boyer was intelligent, quick and completely selfless, creating space, time and chances for the Scotsman. MacDougall (or MacDou-goal, as he was styled by headline writers and in his autobiography) finished on 42 league goals as Bournemouth secured promotion.

The following season, MacDougall scored 35 goals in the league and nine in a single game: an 11-0 FA Cup crushing of Margate, later huffing that he should have had more. He joined Manchester United, then logged impressive numbers at both Norwich and Southampton before returning to Dean Court.

THE SIXTIES AND BEYOND

With teams moving away from the old W-M formation and playing four across the defence – and often in midfield, too – the number of goals scored in English football began to shrink back to levels seen before 1925's revision of Law 11.

The most extraordinary performance of the '60s came from the unsung Terry Bly. The tall, gangly, ebullient East Anglian notched 52 goals, with seven hat-tricks, in Peterborough's first ever Football League campaign – a post-war record.

Other noteworthy performers included Watford's handsome hero, Cliff Holton (42 goals in 1959-60), and future England World Cup winner Roger Hunt, who netted 41 for Liverpool in their 1961-62 Second Division promotion season. And Kevin Hector of Bradford Park Avenue was just 21 when he banged in 44 goals over the 1965-66 campaign; the sharp, skilful striker went on to win three league titles at Derby and then become a postman.

In 57 years since, only three men have been inducted to The 40 Club. Last term, Aleksander Mitrovic's 43 Fulham strikes made the Serbian the club's sole member from outside the British Isles. So far...

GUY WHITTINGHAM

Every fan of a certain age knows that Guy Whittingham bought himself out of the British Army to play professional football.

Rejected by several clubs as a teenager, Whittingham joined the army as a physical instructor in 1982. After a two-year stint in Germany, he returned to England, combining army life with featuring part-time for Yeovil. Knocking in 19 goals from 23 Glovers games caught Portsmouth's attention, and manager John Gregory offered the striker professional terms. Whittingham paid off the remainder of his army contract ("Pompey gave me the money back later") and made his pro debut, aged 24, at the start of the 1989-90 season.

Though small, Pompey's new man was so combative that fans labelled him 'Corporal Punishment'. He was certainly wholehearted, flinging himself about as if joy-riding inside a stolen body. Like the majority of tenacious, journeymen pros, Whittingham's exact skills were hard to pinpoint. He put himself about. He got into the right areas. That sort of thing.

There was nothing in Whittingham's history to prepare anyone for his golden campaign of 1992-93. His career record was little more than average, and he'd scored 11 goals from 37 appearances in his previous Pompey term. What happened next is anyone's guess.

Benefitting from the brilliance of his strike partner, the cavalier-haired former Spurs star Paul Walsh, as well as the tricky wide play of ex-England winger Mark Chamberlain and the probing passing of midfielder Alan McLaughlin, Whittingham briefly turned into the ultimate fox in the box. The ball went in off his boots, head, shins, knees and, more than once, his backside. It was harder for him to miss than score. He registered more than half of Pompey's goals; the highlight, a series of neat one-twos with Walsh that climaxed in Whittingham bashing the ball into Bristol Rovers' net. A club-record 42 goals surpassed the milestone set in 1926-27 by Wyndham 'Willie' Haines, nicknamed 'Farmer's Boy'.

Ironically, prolific Pompey missed out on automatic promotion to the Premier League on 'goals scored' (specifically, one) and lost in the play-offs to Leicester, who then lost to Swindon. Whittingham moved to Aston Villa that summer and never again reached 12 goals in a league campaign. A single-season superhero went back to being a regular Guy.

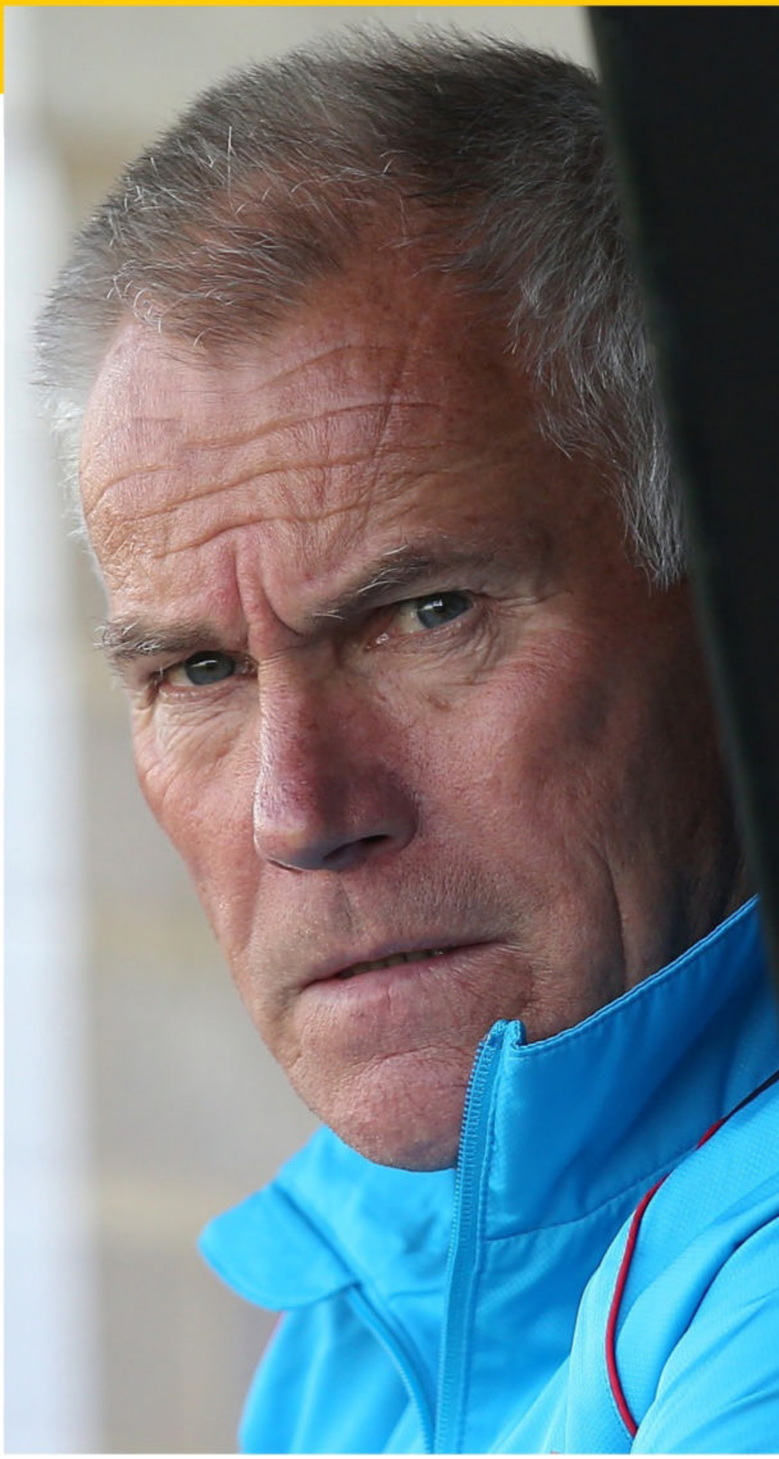
Below For one season only, Guy was unstoppable... **Right** ...with a little help from Walsh

HOMES SOUTHERN
ZURICH INSU

LIKE MANY JOURNEYMEN PROS, WHITTINGHAM'S EXACT SKILLS WERE DIFFICULT TO PINPOINT

AROUND THE GROUNDS

EFL • NON-LEAGUE • SCOTLAND



INTERVIEW

PETER TAYLOR

The Maldon & Tiptree boss on swapping Premier League and international dugouts for non-league, and making Becks skipper

Interview Chris Evans

You've managed at international level, in the Premier League and spent more than 15 years in the EFL. What made you take on the job at eighth-tier Maldon & Tiptree, then?
Maldon & Tiptree have got a little project to get good young players into the club that will eventually go on to be in the Football League. They gave me a call and put the idea to me. It just suits me and my life at the minute, because I want to be doing something and being out on the training field a couple of times a week is something I really enjoy. The club is 25 miles from my house and even though it's a lower level, the players are keen as mustard and desperate to do well.

You turned 70 in January. What's life like as a septuagenarian gaffer?
Even though I'm 70, I feel as though I'm still getting better because you learn from every experience, whatever level you're at. I'm still open enough to learn and I've still got the hunger to be out on the training field. The only thing I'm frustrated about is that I can't demonstrate the way I used to. I was a half-decent player and could put a ball where I wanted it, but I can't do that any more. That's frustrating, but the mind is still good and my sense of humour is still good, I think.

What are the main differences between managing at the very top of the game and in non-league?
The main difference at a lower level is that you can't just do one session on something – that won't work. If you've got a free week and can have two training sessions, you've got to do the same things in both of them, whereas if you're dealing with the very top boys, you'd do a crossing and finishing session with them and they'd get it straight away. For example, if I were taking the full England team training now I'd give them a totally different session than I would at Maldon. That's nothing against Maldon, it's simply acknowledging the standards and what each group needs to achieve.

Your first management job was at Dartford back in 1986. How has non-league changed since then?
One of the differences is that teams mainly played 4-4-2 and now they're talking about 4-2-3-1, so while a lot of the roles are still the same, the way teams try to play has changed. Teams try to play out from the back and create better chances. Another big difference I'm noticing is how high up the pitch teams are trying to win the ball back. Even at a lower level now, there are teams playing a 4-2-3-1 and really pressing high, which they're getting from the Premier League. I can tell you that there are coaches at this level that could go into a room with Sir Alex Ferguson, David Moyes or Jose Mourinho and get on well with them and understand each other. We should respect that a bit more.

> **"YOU'RE A LONG TIME DEAD, SO I'M GOING TO CARRY ON COACHING WHILE I'M STILL ABLE"**

In 37 years of management, which have been your proudest moments?
The highlight at club level was Hull City without a doubt. When I went there in 2002, Hull were 18th in League Two and a sleeping giant that unfortunately some good managers before hadn't made a success of. We secured two promotions, but not only that, we did it while selling loads of players and making a lot of money for the club to build a new training ground and help for the future. I'm very proud of that.

You also managed England for one game as caretaker in 2000...
As a boy from Rochford in Essex who desperately wanted to be a footballer and then a coach, getting the chance to manage England for one game is something I never thought would happen, no matter how much I was

determined that it could. But it did and nobody can take that away from me. It's the only time I've ever managed a team when I knew it would be the only game I was doing it for, so I made up my mind early that I was going to enjoy every last second of it. If I'd had a contract with England and my job was dependent on every result, I may not have enjoyed it so much, but that wasn't the case – I knew it was for one game, I picked a younger squad and I enjoyed it. I think the players did too.

Despite the match ending in a 1-0 defeat to Italy, it became especially memorable because you made David Beckham England captain for the first time. Are you proud of that?
It was nice because it worked out so well. I had Gareth Southgate and Gary Neville in the squad too, and if you look back at it you might think, 'Hang on, they would have been much better captains than David', but I went for him. After the 1998 World Cup, when he got sent off against Argentina, he got pummelled by every supporter in the land apart from Manchester United fans and I thought, 'What character that boy has got'. What people don't appreciate is that every time there was a friendly or training session, David was there – he would never not turn up and he deserves a lot of credit for that. If David does anything, he does it right… and if he was going to be a captain, he'd have worked incredibly hard to be a good captain.

You've held 24 different positions as a coach over the years. Any regrets?
A lot of young coaches that start out today probably think they're never going to get the sack, but it's going to happen. I've got the sack too many times for things I believe I shouldn't have. They're my regrets. I'd prefer to have had fewer clubs and been with them longer. I was at Hull for four years, but I had too many jobs where I was there for a year or whatever. I had a temper at times if I felt certain things weren't going right, and I'd let the chairman know. If you fall out with people, there's a chance you've got less time when things aren't going well.

How long do you plan carrying on for?
Hopefully a long time. I had a new knee put in about four years ago that messed me up a bit and meant that I couldn't even go on the training field at first, but that's perfect now – not for demonstrating but for working. I may be 70 but I go out walking every day and keep myself ticking over. If I didn't feel I looked the part on the training field, I wouldn't go and do it, but I don't think that's the case. Hopefully I can keep going because you're a long time dead, so while I can do it, I will.

EFL NEWS

LAST-CHANCE SALOON

'Tis the season when thousands of young footballers are released by clubs, but assessment trials offer one last throw of the dice for those desperate to make it

Being told you're not good enough to earn a professional contract is one of the most heartbreaking conversations any young footballer can have. But that doesn't always have to be where the journey stops.

Many young players find a route back into the game via assessment trials, also known as exit trials.

"Assessment trials are for players who are coming to the end of their apprenticeships, who aren't going to be kept on by their clubs for professional contracts," explains Henry Westmacott, media officer at League Football Education (LFE), who will run three events across the UK throughout May. "We help those players to find new opportunities."

The trials bring together hundreds of players seeking a second chance. The only eligibility requirements are that they've spent the previous season on the books of an EFL club, and that they are a PFA member. They even consist of technical drills and smaller and larger-sided games, with scouts in attendance.

"Not quite every Football League club is present but the vast majority send someone down," Westmacott tells *FFT*. "We have Premier League and Scottish Premiership attendees, too. If they see somebody they like, they register their interest and we let the player know."

The LFE trials are perhaps the best known, but there are many others. These camps can be life-changing for players with perhaps the greatest examples being Jamie Vardy and Chris Smalling, who both took part in the process and later went on to win Premier League titles and earn England caps.

> "TRIALS ALLOW THE PARTICIPANTS A CHANCE TO CONTINUE PLAYING THE GAME THEY LOVE"

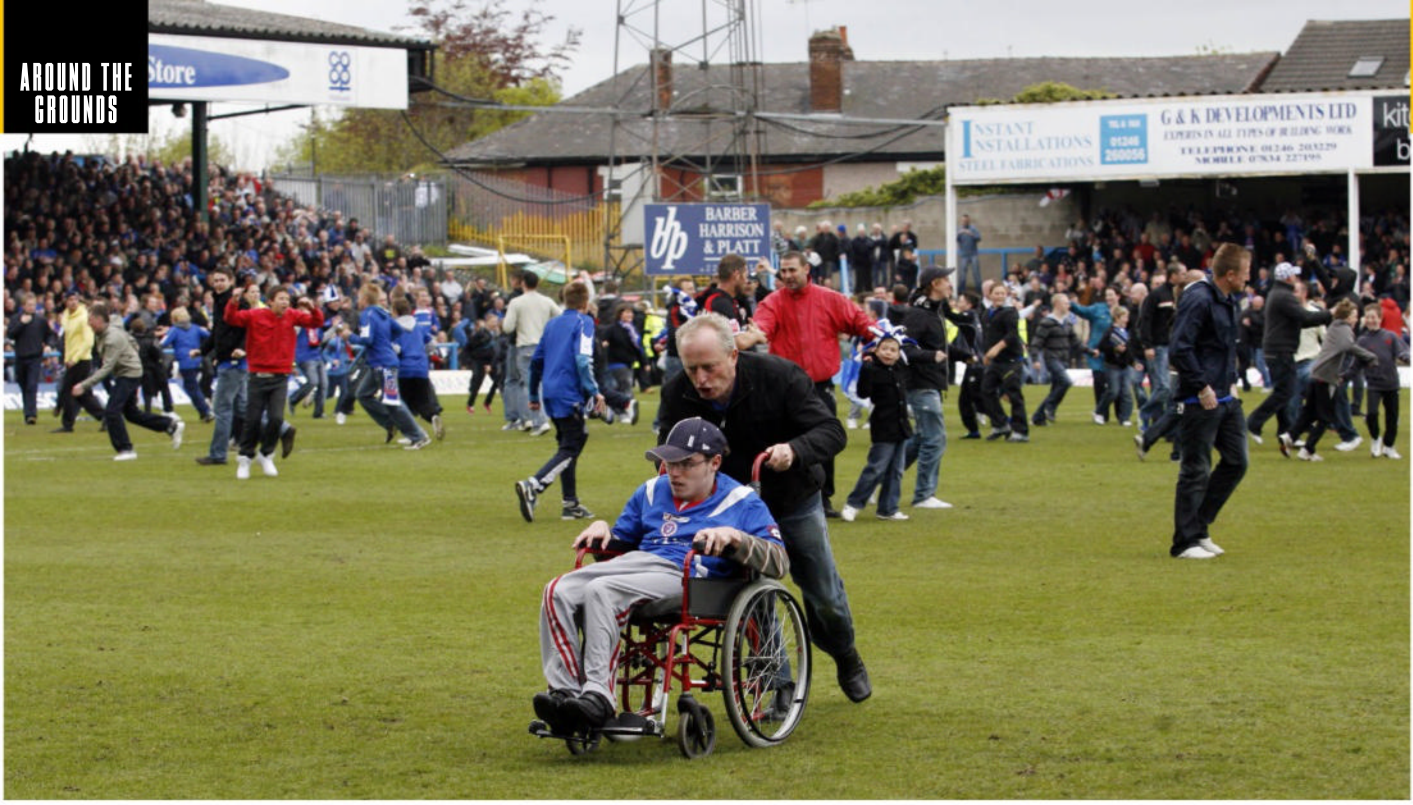
"I was planning to go to university," Smalling, who won the inaugural Europa Conference League with Roma last season [below], recalls of being released by Millwall as a teenager. The defender then popped along to assessment trials before being picked up by non-league Maidstone and sealing a move to Fulham. "I had nothing to lose and gave it my all. It worked out pretty well."

While Smalling ultimately decided against going to university, some players are driven towards higher education as a result of the trials.

"The games are available to watch online, meaning we get overseas interest in many participants," says Westmacott. "One growing outcome we're seeing is young players being picked up by colleges in the US and earning scholarships to go over and study. It may not be what they were expecting to do in their careers, but it allows them to keep playing the game they love, as well as leave with a degree or diploma in their pocket at the end of it."

The coming weeks and months will see thousands of young footballers attempting to dazzle for a place in the professional game.

Tune in… you may catch a glimpse of a future top-flight champion.



FINAL DAY DRAMA

Glamorous cup showpieces can't match the mayhem of ending the season with everybody playing at once...

JIMMY GLASS

"Jimmy Glass, get up there! You might as well, for heaven's sake." Has radio commentary ever been so prophetic?

Forget Alisson – Glass' late strike for Carlisle against Plymouth on the final day of the 1998-99 Division Three season will forever be the narrative pinnacle of goalscoring goalkeepers. It saved one club and doomed another.

With 10 seconds left, the score 1-1 and Nigel Pearson's Cumbrians having to win to stay in the Football League, the on-loan glovesman came up for a corner. His opposite number parried and Glass pounced, walloping home from close range and wheeling away, arms aloft, like a seasoned finisher. Carlisle fans stormed the pitch and the referee was almost caught in a pile-on.

"Everybody who loves football knows that goal," reflected Glass later. It was less popular in Scarborough: their fans had just been on the pitch themselves, celebrating survival. Their relegated club would never return to the league.

The strike which saved Carlisle from oblivion became a pub-quiz staple and Channel 4 had the fourth-tier goal in their 2002 list of sport's 100 greatest moments. Glass' boots are enshrined in the National Football Museum even now. Might as well, for heaven's sake.

'HELICOPTER SUNDAY'

Celtic led bitter rivals Rangers by just two points going into 2004-05's final day, but any hopes of drama were dashed when the Bhoys took the lead at Motherwell. A helicopter carrying the trophy set off for Fir Park, for the celebrations that would surely follow.

Or not. Rangers sealed a 1-0 win at Hibs and Motherwell's Scott McDonald, a Celtic fan, scored twice in the final two minutes to stun his beloved Hoops. The helicopter was swiftly rerouted to Edinburgh, where Alex McLeish and his Gers players accepted their prize with equal parts giddiness and incredulity.

PAINED PROTESTS

White-masked fans (right) provided an eerie backdrop to Oldham's final-day tussle with Crawley in May 2022. The creepy stunt was another protest against Abdallah Lemsagam, whose tenure had seen the club driven into administration and out of the Football League.

A week earlier, Latics fans had breached the Boundary Park pitch to get their clash with Salford abandoned, echoing Leyton Orient's protest in their final home game of 2016-17; they, too, had been relegated under disastrous ownership (and five 'permanent' managers). After fans had left, the match seemingly over, Orient and Colchester sneakily played the final minutes, two hours later, "to maintain the competition's integrity".

TOMMY HILFIGER

TEMPTING FATE

In 1997-98, Bristol City and Watford went into the third tier's finale locked on 85 points, with the former clear on goal difference. Cue: premature celebrations, as Robins fans in the away end at Peterborough unfurled homemade 'Champions' banners.

Predictably, it was a waste of bedsheets. City lost; Watford won.

INVASION ON WHEELS

After Chesterfield hit a late winner past promotion rivals Bournemouth at the end of 2009-10's League Two season, supporters took to the field in joy – though not all of them ran on.

In one viral clip, a wheelchair-bound fan (above) was seen rolling on to get involved. His unamused companion duly sprinted after him and dragged him back off the pitch with a scolding.

COVID CANCELLATIONS

When Leagues One and Two ended their coronavirus-impacted campaigns early, using points-per-game, it meant 'final day' fixtures had unknowingly been and gone. A game in hand was invaluable: with one point separating third from eighth, Wycombe jumped five places into the 2019-20 play-offs, then won them. Peterborough fell out of the top six, and still go on about it.

SWING AND A PRAYER

"I don't have words in my mind. I just have disaster." Preach, Sabri Lamouchi.

Nottingham Forest's gaffer had just experienced the final day of the Championship in that same season, when his side would've been in the play-offs if they only avoided a three-point, five-goal swing to Swansea. Forest lost 4-1 at home, Stoke scoring in injury time just as Swans sealed their own 4-1 win away at Reading. Ah.

BOY'S A BIT SPECIAL

AARON RAMSEY

BORO (ON LOAN FROM ASTON VILLA)

THE LOWDOWN No, not that Aaron Ramsey – though if the Englishman's career stays on the same trajectory, he could surpass his Welsh midfield namesake. The younger brother and team-mate of Aston Villa's Jacob Ramsey, Aaron had impressed in a spell at Cheltenham prior to going on loan to Norwich this season, and he started well before a knee injury ended his time there. After moving to upwardly-mobile Middlesbrough on January deadline day, the loanee bagged three goals in his first seven games and hasn't looked back since.

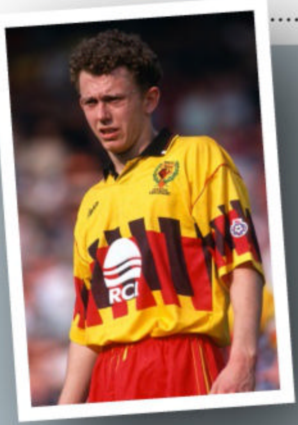
HIGHLIGHT A year after lifting the FA Youth Cup with Villa, he scored in England's extra-time win over Israel in the 2022 Under-19 Euros Final.

DID YOU KNOW? The 20-year-old's dad, Mark, is a former professional boxer who, early in his career, twice fought future world champion Ricky Hatton. He lost on points both times.

WHAT'S NEXT? Helping Boro to win the play-offs and gain promotion to the Premier League, then returning to Aston Villa and pushing to join his brother in Unai Emery's first-team squad for next season. Piece of cake.

KIT CRIMES | WATFORD, HOME 1991-93

When the Hornets turned 100 in 1991-92, they celebrated with road-sign chic. This Bukta nightmare featured diagonal blocks of red and black beneath a jarring white sponsor, then continued the grim pattern on its sleeves. The honking effort was replaced in '93 by Hummel, who reworked their iconic Denmark Euros top in yellow, black and red. Well, 102nd anniversaries are always better anyway.



RECORD BREAKERS

DUNCAN SHEARER

HUDDERSFIELD TO SWINDON | 1988

£250,000

PEDIGREE Raised in Fort William, Shearer began at Clachnacuddin in the Scottish Highland Football League, where Aberdeen's Alex Ferguson took note of his battling displays. In the early 1980s, he invited Shearer to play in a reserves game at Pittodrie; it was cancelled, and so Ferguson ultimately missed out on signing not one but two strikers named Shearer during his managerial career. Duncan moved to Chelsea in 1983, but after just two league games in three years, he joined second-tier Huddersfield.

THE SITUATION Shearer scored 21 league goals in 1986-87 but could not save the Terriers from dropping into the Third Division a year later. Swindon manager Lou Macari was desperate for a forward following a clearout, and so stumped up a club-record £250,000 to buy him.

GOOD VALUE? Excellent. In four seasons at the County Ground, the redhead was top scorer every time, with tallies of 14, 21, 22 and 22. In all competitions, the Scot netted 97 goals in 192 appearances and would have helped Swindon to seal promotion to the top flight in 1989-90, but for their 36 (yes, 36!) breaches of financial rules. Oops.

OUTCOME Shearer was sold for £800,000 to second-tier Blackburn in March 1992, where he managed just six games and one paltry goal. His transfer did weaken Swindon, however, which ensured that Blackburn snuck into the play-off places before Duncan's namesake, Alan, replaced him at Ewood Park.

BEST&WORST

LUTON TOWN

Ian Robertson from *We Are Luton Town* discusses points deductions and seeing his club rise from the ashes

XI

BEST: Les Sealey, Matt Taylor, Chris Coyne, Steve Foster, Mal Donaghy, James Justin, Ricky Hill, Ahmet Brkovic, David Moss, Mick Harford, Brian Stein.
WORST: Dino Seremet, Shane Blackett, Richard Dryden, Gavin McGowan, Jamie Campbell, Johnny Vilstrup, Friedrich Breitenfelder, Richard Langley, Dean Brennan, Landry Zahana-Oni, Warren Feeney.

PLAYER

B: Ricky Hill [right] should have had more than three England caps and it was a travesty that he didn't.
W: We've had so many poor players over the years; some made me think I might still have something left in the tank, and none more so than Warren Feeney. Even I would have scored more goals than him.

MOMENT

B: For most, it'll be Brian Stein's winner against Arsenal in the Littlewoods Cup Final, but my dad left me at home for that. So, for me, it's Claude Gnakpa [right] scoring the winner in the 2009 JPT Final – a big moment of unity for Luton fans in a difficult time.
W: On the way to successive relegations from the Championship to the Conference, we were slapped with heavy points deductions from the Football League. It nearly killed us off.

GAME

B: Hyde away, in the last game of the 2013-14 Skrill Premier season. After a few years fighting to get out of that division, that game lifted such a weight from our shoulders. We were back in the Football League.
W: Darlington away in 2009. We lost 5-1 and it was one of those moments of acceptance: I knew we weren't going to recover from the 30-point deduction imposed on us. We were in the worst jam I'd witnessed.

SEASON

B: It has to be the 2004-05 campaign. That was some of the best football I've seen us play since the 1980s. We never felt like we were going to lose on the Steve Howard promotion train.
W: It's easily the 2008-09 season, in which we were relegated before we'd kicked a ball. We started on -30 points and never recovered. The pressure on the players was insurmountable.

OWNER

B: Our current owners are not only the best we've had, but by far the best in the Football League. The trajectory we've been on since they saved us from freefall is something we only dream of. The foundations they have laid for the future shouldn't go unrecognised, either.
W: From his 'Manager Idol' phone vote through to administration, John Gurney was a complete disaster.

CULT HERO

B: On and off the pitch, Mick Harford [left] is everything to Luton Town. We owe him so much.
W: I love Chris Kamara, but he was awful at Luton. With performances half as good as his barnet, he would have been a success.

NICKNAME

B: 'Bruno' for Brian Stein. Who put the ball in the back of the Arsenal net? Bruno, Bruno… Stein.
W: Jason Cummings: 'Cumdog'. Awful.

CHANT

B: "F**k the FA and the Football League – we are the famous Luton Town. They tried to kill us off, but we're not so soft, 'cos we are the famous Luton Town…"
W: I don't love the aspersions cast upon Tony Thorpe's mother in one chant. I get it [he left a cash-strapped Luton for QPR in 2003] but I wouldn't be disappointed to see that die off. I still catch myself singing along, mind.

MANAGER

B: John Moore, John Still, and Nathan Jones are all notable mentions, but I think David Pleat [below] sneaks it.
W: Terry Westley's tenure had some of the worst football I've seen, but Lennie Lawrence was key to our '90s decline.

HARD MAN

B: Harford: a gentleman, but don't get on the wrong side of him.
W: Ex-manager Richard Money had the aura of Charles Bronson but was more like Charlie Chaplin.

THE GAME'S GONE

MOTHERWELL 4-3 DUNDEE UNITED, 1991

Brotherly love? 'The Family Final' featured goals, fouls and a ruptured spleen

The half-and-half scarf is a hated thing in football, but any member of the McLean family could have been forgiven for sporting a woolly combination of Motherwell and Dundee United on May 18, 1991.

The Scottish Cup showpiece that year will forever be known as 'The Family Final', as former Rangers midfielder Tommy McLean took charge of Motherwell while his elder sibling, Jim McLean, was managing Dundee United opposite him.

Jim's United battered Tommy's Well in the opening stages, having a goal ruled out and whacking the inside of a post, but it was Motherwell forward Iain Ferguson who headed in the opener with half an hour played. United had created chances and just couldn't take them – but, little did they know, Well goalkeeper Ally Maxwell had badly injured himself trying to keep them out.

It was later discovered that Maxwell had ruptured his spleen and broken several ribs in a collision with towering Terrors defender John Clark. In clear discomfort, grimacing every time he kicked the ball, the keeper miraculously managed to last the entire match. He had to – there was no substitute custodian available, so forward Stevie Kirk would have had to come on and play in nets.

Still, there was absolutely nothing Maxwell could have done about Dave Bowman's equaliser, although the Well bounced back with two strikes of their own: 18-year-old Phil O'Donnell made it 2-1 at Hampden Park before Ian Angus gave Tommy's boys the comfort of a two-goal lead... for all of two minutes. Almost immediately, John O'Neil halved the deficit to keep Jim's Tangerines in the game.

The next 25 minutes were frenetic, frantic and fractious, with tackles flying in from players on both sides as if their managers were reigniting a feud over Christmas presents. In the last minute, with 'MO' practically etched onto the cup, Darren Jackson equalised for Dundee United; they even had a chance to snatch it, but Maurice Malpas missed a gilt-edged opportunity in the cooling embers of the 90. Extra-time followed, and Motherwell realised how lucky they had been to have Kirk up front instead of between the sticks.

A bullet header meant Kirk had netted in every round of the competition. The winner sent Motherwell supporters into hysteria, as a football club and a town: Tommy had told his players that a victory was needed to lift the community after the steelworks had recently closed.

Regardless of the result, this was an emotional day for every McLean. Tragically, the two managers' father didn't see the final, having passed away just a week earlier. It was a game to make any Scotsman proud, however – an unprecedented moment in British football and a seven-goal thriller filled with brilliance and brutality.

CLAIMS TO FAME

BARNSLEY

1 TITANS OF TIER TWO

Barnsley have spent more seasons in the second tier of English football than any other team. Since 1898, the Tykes have spent 78 campaigns dreaming of promotion... usually before settling for mid-table. Their one and only top-flight season came in 1997-98 but, 38 matches later, they were back in familiar surroundings.

2 GLORY DAYS

Barnsley are one of just eight teams from outside the top division to lift the FA Cup, back in 1911-12. A glorious campaign saw the Tykes concede three goals in 12 fixtures, three of which went to extra-time. Harry Tufnell's late, late winner saw off West Bromwich Albion in the final's replay at Bramall Lane.

3 KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT

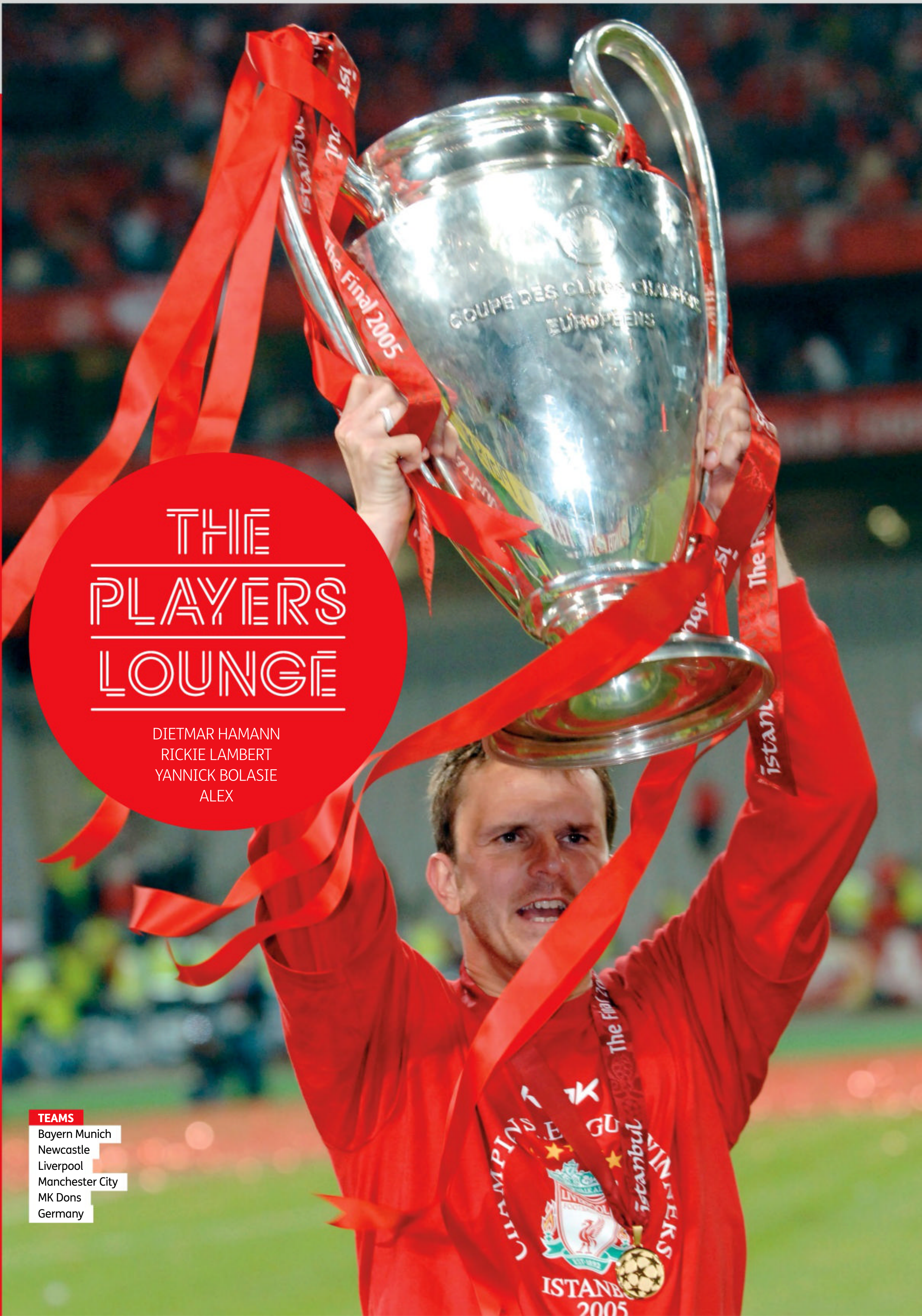
In 2008, Barnsley winger Reuben Noble-Lazarus became the youngest player ever to debut in the Football League, coming on in a 3-0 defeat to Ipswich aged just 15 years and 45 days. Manager Simon Davey joked that he would be given pizza and a ham sandwich as Noble-Lazarus was too young to be paid for his appearance. At least throw in a Diet Coke, gaffer.

4 DODGY DEALINGS

As part of the 2016 *Telegraph* scandal that caught Sam Allardyce giving advice on navigating FA rules about third-party player ownership, Barnsley sacked assistant manager Tommy Wright for taking a £5,000 bribe to arrange player transfers. He was later found guilty of the misdemeanour – no news, though, on whether he drank a pint of wine.

5 FAMOUS FRIENDS

Former Oakland Athletics General Manager Billy Beane, whose analytical approach to baseball economics inspired the Hollywood film *Moneyball*, owns a stake in the Tykes. Brad Pitt is yet to star in a blockbuster about the highs and lows of Barnsley FC, but it's surely just a matter of time.

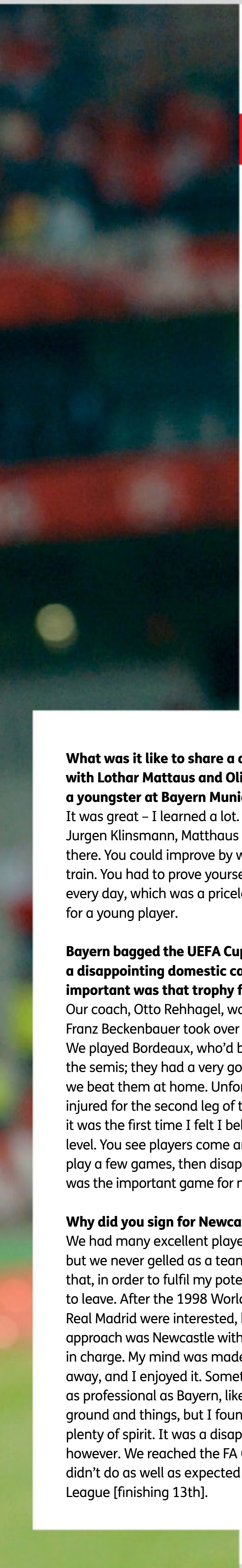

COUPE DES CLUBS CHAMPIONS EUROPEENS
The Final 2005
Istanbul
CHAMPIONS LEAGUE WINNERS
ISTANBUL 2005

THE PLAYERS LOUNGE

DIETMAR HAMANN
RICKIE LAMBERT
YANNICK BOLASIE
ALEX

TEAMS

- Bayern Munich
- Newcastle
- Liverpool
- Manchester City
- MK Dons
- Germany



DIETMAR HAMANN

“SURE, MILAN WERE WORLD-CLASS, BUT I KNEW WE COULD DO IT IF WE TURNED IT INTO A DOGFIGHT”

The German midfielder remembers joy and woe in a range of finals, and breaks his silence on that night in Istanbul...

Interview James Hilsum

What was it like to share a dressing room with Lothar Mattaus and Oliver Kahn as a youngster at Bayern Munich?
It was great – I learned a lot. When I started, Jurgen Klinsmann, Matthaus and Kahn were there. You could improve by watching them train. You had to prove yourself against them every day, which was a priceless experience for a young player.

Bayern bagged the UEFA Cup in 1996 after a disappointing domestic campaign. How important was that trophy for you?
Our coach, Otto Rehhagel, was sacked, so Franz Beckenbauer took over for the final. We played Bordeaux, who’d beaten Milan in the semis; they had a very good team and we beat them at home. Unfortunately I got injured for the second leg of the final, but it was the first time I felt I belonged at this level. You see players come and go – they play a few games, then disappear – but that was the important game for me. I belonged.

Why did you sign for Newcastle in 1998?
We had many excellent players at Bayern, but we never gelled as a team. I always felt that, in order to fulfil my potential, I needed to leave. After the 1998 World Cup in France, Real Madrid were interested, but the keenest approach was Newcastle with Kenny Dalglish in charge. My mind was made up straight away, and I enjoyed it. Sometimes it wasn’t as professional as Bayern, like their training ground and things, but I found a team with plenty of spirit. It was a disappointing year, however. We reached the FA Cup final, but didn’t do as well as expected in the Premier League [finishing 13th].

How disappointing was it to lose the final?
Massively disappointing. They [Newcastle] had lost to Arsenal the year before as well, so it was consecutive losses. We faced a very strong Manchester United team. I felt we had a chance – but this was a Treble-winning squad. They were a little fortunate in their Champions League final against Bayern, but there was no luck against us: they were just better on the day [below]. We couldn’t end that long wait for a trophy, although we still received a great reception back in Newcastle.

What made you leave for Liverpool after just one season?
Gerard Houllier asked if I could see myself moving to Anfield. My mind was made up as soon as we’d spoken, as much as I enjoyed playing for Newcastle. I felt that something was going to happen with the signings they made – and I’d watched Liverpool as a kid in Germany. The clubs agreed a fee and I was happy and proud to join them.

Talk us through the famous cup treble won by Liverpool in your second season there...
We were defensively solid and, in Steven Gerrard and Michael Owen, we had two players who could change a game in a split-second. And we got a bit fortunate in the FA Cup final against Arsenal. I didn’t expect to go there and win three trophies in my second season. It was a great year with a brilliant team spirit. To deliver silverware for the fans after a long wait was amazing.

That UEFA Cup final – a 5-4 extra-time win over Alaves – was a crazy game, wasn't it?
Yeah. We beat Barcelona in the semis and didn’t concede [nor in the quarter-finals], so everybody expected us to beat Alaves – we should have managed the game better. We usually were good at that, but the final went to extra time after we’d been winning 2-0 and 3-1. We were lucky with an own goal, as one of few matches decided on the golden goal rule. If it’d gone to penalties, anything could have happened.

Can you describe the emotions inside the Liverpool dressing room at half-time of the 2005 Champions League Final?
You would have thought we’d already lost. Milan were the best – there wasn't one player who wasn't world-class – so if they’re 3-0 up at half-time, there should be no way back. The boss [Rafael Benitez] was calm and said I was coming on to try to control the match. Xabi [Alonso] and I were in the middle and Steven had licence to bomb forward because we needed a goal as soon as possible. The fans were singing, more in desperation than belief, but Milan scored three in the first half so I knew we could do it in the second if we made it into a dogfight, because we always found ways to come out on top – that was my thinking. Obviously, we got the first goal back quickly and that changed everything.

How did Germany reach the 2002 World Cup Final after losing 5-1 to England?
Expectations weren’t high, but we knew we were a solid team. We had a good defence and, in Kahn, the best goalkeeper. Michael Ballack and Miroslav Klose were big players who could score. I was quietly confident. We got a little fortunate with the draw because South Korea knocked out Italy and Spain, so we avoided the top teams. We won all three knockout games 1-0, against Paraguay, USA and South Korea, which was all we needed to reach the final. I think that final might have had a different result if Ballack hadn’t been suspended. Brazil were good, but beatable.

You signed for Manchester City in 2006. Could you sense the club’s potential then?
It started after my first season, when the Thai [former] prime minister bought the club and Sven-Goran Eriksson came in. We bought several brilliant players like Elano and Martin Petrov, and we had some great homegrown talent in Micah Richards, Stephen Ireland and Michael Johnson. It was very enjoyable. We did the double over Man United for the first time in ages [38 years] and were in the top four until Christmas, but we couldn’t quite keep it up. Then the ownership changed again, Mark Hughes took charge, Nigel de Jong and Vincent Kompany signed alongside Robinho, and that’s really where it all started. That was my last season, but I could sense big things were about to happen. ●

RICKIE LAMBERT

“THE CHAIRMAN’S SON TOLD ME, ‘MY DAD WANTS A NEW STRIKER LIKE YOU, BUT WITH PACE!’”

From struggling right-back to international goalscorer, the twinkle-toed targetman talks about proving people wrong

Interview Mark Sanderson

Aged 31, having played in all four divisions, you scored the winner against Scotland at Wembley with your first touch for England. That must have been quite a lot to take in...
My whole career was about proving people wrong. I wanted to show I deserved to be in the squad. Mentally, I was on it all week in training and I think the other England players were surprised by my technical ability and touch. I was thinking, ‘Please give me game time’. After the match, my face was twitching – I couldn’t believe what had just happened.

Yet 16 years earlier, your Liverpool dream had been crushed. What exactly happened?
I grew up in nearby Kirby and fell in love with Liverpool as early as I can remember – John Barnes was my favourite player. I played for their academy and, believe it or not, I had some pace up to the age of 13, then my body started to change. When I was 15, the club told me they didn’t see me making it. I was totally devastated, and went home and cried.

How did your new start with Blackpool go?
I was playing at right-back and really unfit. Getting on the Youth Training Scheme meant the world to me, but I struggled physically. I was the slowest there. My first pre-season was the worst experience of my career: doing laps, I was at the back with the head coaches shouting, “Come on, Rickie” and the entire squad laughing at me. That knocked me for six, but I wasn’t going to give up and leave.

But it was a different kind of mobility issue that forced you to leave Macclesfield, yes?
Nigel Worthington was replaced as Blackpool manager by Steve McMahon, another hero of mine. He told me I wasn’t for him. I got a trial with Macclesfield and did pretty well, but six months in, I still didn’t have a contract. I was being paid 50 quid a week but it was an hour and 20 minutes’ journey, and it was costing me 20 quid in taxi fares just to get anywhere close enough to bag a lift the rest of the way. I couldn’t afford to stay – my mum and dad had no money – so I told the club that I had to leave. They gave me a contract in the end.

There’s YouTube footage of your 40-yard volley for Macclesfield, which completed a hat-trick – why the low-key celebration?
I was scoring worldies for the reserves every week, so that finish wasn’t a surprise to me. The form got me a move to Stockport, which was massive. My weekly pay went from £120 to a grand. I felt loaded. Paying my mum £20 housekeeping didn’t seem so bad. Playing in midfield, I scored 13 in my first season, and there were even rumours of me moving up to the Championship. But then we had a bad run, the fans were unhappy and I felt I was their target. I was booed and lost confidence. Rochdale offered £25,000 and Stockport were probably happy to get me off the wage bill.

It was only at Rochdale that you started playing up front, but you’ve said before that you felt you’d developed bad habits...
At Macclesfield we’d all go out drinking, and I loved that. Looking back, I was drinking to excess. You wouldn’t mean to get bladdered, but after two or three pints you’d be looking at each other and saying, ‘All right, let’s have another one’. When things went wrong at Stockport, I was going out far too much. It’s embarrassing to say there were times I went to training a bit worse for wear. I thought my dream of playing at a higher level was over.

Was it at Bristol Rovers, afterwards, that you mastered playing as a centre-forward?
Rovers came in on deadline day and I had to check a map to see where Bristol was. After I missed pre-season due to injury, some fans might have wondered who they’d signed, but they took to me after a derby winner against Bristol City. I formed a great partnership up front with Richard Walker. I probably learned more from him than from any other player; I’d never been coached to play up front, so I watched him, because he was just as slow as me but always got in front of his markers.

TEAMS

- Blackpool
- Macclesfield
- Stockport
- Rochdale
- Bristol Rovers
- Southampton
- Liverpool
- West Brom
- Cardiff
- England

Southampton paid £1m-plus for you – a big fee in 2009 for a club then in League One. Did you realise the size of their fanbase?
I didn't fully. I didn't know how they'd take to me, either. I knew I was the best player in League One; Saints fans made me the best player in the Championship. I'm 6ft 2in and they made me feel 6ft 6in. When they sang my name, opposing players would look at me and start shaking their heads, it was so loud.

Back-to-back promotions to the Premier League must have felt pretty good, too.
[Chairman] Nicola Cortese wanted better all the time, and I knew he wanted to replace me. We were in Austria for pre-season and his son was there; he said, "My Daddy says we're looking for someone just like you who scores goals, but has pace'. The lads were cracking up, but I knew I needed to knuckle down. Nicola was ruthless – his ambition was a huge factor in the club's rise, but I enjoyed proving people wrong. For years I was told I wasn't good enough for the Championship, so the build-up to the final-day victory over Coventry that took us to the Premier League was the most nervous I've ever been. The fans celebrating with us on the pitch [left] was one of the best experiences of my life.

Do you have a favourite Saints goal?
My best was at MK Dons, when I took a goal kick down on my chest and volleyed in from 40-odd yards. But there are many favourites: scoring at Plymouth to seal promotion to the Championship; then my first goal there, away at Ipswich; scoring against Portsmouth, our rivals; and then my first Premier League goal, against Manchester City on the opening day.

What was going through your mind in June 2014 when, aged 32, you went to the World Cup *and* earned a move back to Liverpool?
Brendan Rodgers offered me four weeks off after the World Cup, but I wanted to get as fit as I could be, so after two weeks I went back with the youth team to really push myself. After a few weeks, I felt tired. We trained very hard when [Mauricio] Pochettino was Saints' manager, but by now I was in my thirties. As the campaign began, I was going backwards.

Your goal at Villa Park seemed significant.
Yeah, there were quite a lot of emotions in that goal celebration. I wanted to do so well for Liverpool, but it didn't happen. I'd always had back problems; at Saints they had a way of looking after my body, but it was different at Liverpool with European football added to the mix as well. I had several epidurals in my spine, and I knew I'd pay a price later in life.

Did injuries curtail the rest of your career?
At West Brom I had blood cells injected into my spine to treat an injury, which reduced my movement. I wasn't at Premier League level any more. I moved to Cardiff and they offered me out on loan. I knew it was all over. Reflecting now, my head wasn't right when I left Liverpool – and when I retired, I wanted to get away from football. Now the dust has settled, I look back on my career with pride. ○

TEAMS
Hillingdon Borough
Floriana
Plymouth
Rushden & Diamonds (loan)
Barnet (loan)
Bristol City
Crystal Palace
Everton
Aston Villa (loan)
Anderlecht (loan)
Sporting (loan)
Middlesbrough (loan)
Caykur Rizespor
DR Congo

YANNICK BOLASIE

"BRAD WRIGHT-PHILLIPS AND I HAD AN MC BATTLE IN THE STUDIO – WE SAID, 'OK, LET'S SETTLE THE SCORE'"

The rapid rapper recalls his grime clashes with BWP, as well as cutting his own YouTube reels en route to the Premier League

Interview Ben Mountain

You swapped non-league outfit Hillingdon for Maltese top-flight club Floriana when you were just 18. What took you to Malta?
A family friend was meant to go to Malta and he ended up getting injured, so they needed a replacement. I had to do a trial at Floriana. Malta's leagues don't have many overseas players, so I was very young for a foreigner. It was a really good experience – I played full-time and was able to recognise my ability outside England. It was then that I noticed how much faster I was than a lot of people. I stayed out there for a year, collected video clips of me playing and made highlight reels on YouTube. I was also doing a bit of MCing at the time, so I knew how to film, edit and put out videos. At the end of that campaign, I sent it to the guy who took me to Malta and he passed it to Leicester and Plymouth. Before I'd even travelled back to England, Sturm Graz in Austria and Hoffenheim in the Bundesliga wanted to sign me, but I wanted to return to England. The clips I'd made got a great response and Plymouth offered me a two-year contract – I never looked back.

While you were at the club, Plymouth were declared insolvent and docked 10 points, and manager Peter Reid had to pay players out of his own pocket. What was it like to think you might not receive your wages?
I remember the PFA helping, and maybe the gaffer did. The money situation was OK. I was living with a mate at the time. I hadn't been ▶

earning much in Malta, and I'd lived on EMA [Education Maintenance Allowance] money at college, which was £30 a month, so I knew how to live within my means.

You joined Bristol City in 2011 but were in and out of the side. Is that what motivated you to sign for Crystal Palace a year later?
It was frustrating, because I believed I was doing enough to play, or be on the bench at a minimum. It just wasn't materialising. Then I heard Palace were interested. I saw them play, watched Wilfried Zaha on one side and thought I could be the predominant figure on the opposite flank. I had to force the move, as I really wanted to go and Bristol City weren't sure about letting me leave. All I cared about was playing football. It went ahead and now it's a great chapter in my career.

You enjoyed success at Palace in 2012-13, assisting both goals in the play-off semi-final victory at Brighton. Did it hurt when Ian Holloway didn't pick you in the final?
That definitely hurt, not even coming on. It would have been painful if we didn't make it to the Premier League. Because we made it, I channelled all of the anger and rage I had and attacked the Premier League. I came in with no fear – I didn't care who I was facing. That generation were proper players too, but I didn't care. I changed my physique: I got stronger, faster, bigger, and knew I was a lot stronger than most people.

You were paid just £20 for your debut with Hillingdon. Ten years later, Everton paid £25 million to sign you. How did that feel?
It's so much money, but I knew I was worth it. I could see what I did on the pitch. I took people out of the game. In one-versus-one situations, I fancied myself all day long. At one point, Palace gaffer Alan Pardew started to play me through the middle because he knew I could draw two markers, which made space for the likes of Wilf, Jason Puncheon and Glenn Murray. My game wasn't all about goals and assists; it was also about the little things that people didn't see as often. I knew my worth to Palace and knew what I could bring to Everton – that's why they wanted to sign me so much.

You suffered a serious ACL injury just four months into your Toffees spell. How did it hit you, learning you'd be out for a year?
It's the worst injury a footballer can suffer, especially because at that time I'd hit the ground running – really picking up where I'd left off at Palace. I was bringing it to Everton and I've always believed that wherever I go, I can do that. So, it was devastating to stay out for a year. You're never going to be the same after an injury like that. What I'd built up through my youth, my instinctiveness and things like that, gets lost when you sit in your house for a year. It affected me.

How did you find things, coming back?
I'd just come back when Big Sam [Allardyce] took charge and I realised that I was lacking my old pace. I put pressure on myself when I shouldn't have. I wanted to help the team and, being the guy I am, I came back a little too early – I hit a brick wall. Palace came to Everton and I didn't get the opportunity to play against them – I was on the bench and didn't come on – so that hurt. Then Marco Silva became manager in the summer and stayed for almost two years [while Bolasie went out on loan], and Carlo Ancelotti came in after that. I think if I'd been there earlier with Carlo, it would have been different. The stuff he was saying to me privately was good. He knew my ability as a player.

After four loan spells away from Everton, you left in 2021 and are now with Caykur Rizespor in Turkey. What took you there?
My agent was actually planning for me to go to Lyon or Lille in France, which would have been a decent move in order to stay at the highest level possible, which is where I think I belonged. I think I had a lot to give. But it didn't materialise, unfortunately, and these guys had been trying to sign me all summer [in 2021]. I said, "OK, I'm not going to bother looking around again – this project seems all right". So, I ended up coming here to Rize.

As an MC, you recorded a *Lord of the Mic* battle against fellow footballer Bradley Wright-Phillips. Tell us about your passion for grime and what you've done as an MC.
The passion originally came from when I was at secondary school. Sometimes in the school playground, the teachers would confiscate the ball and everyone would go into a circle and do grime battles and MC battles. I didn't know how to do it properly and I wasn't that good, so it was one thing I wanted to learn. I used to only scribble lyrics and practise my flow. Eventually I got better and better, and I listened to radio sets for hours – just people MCing. It became part of me. It takes me to a different place. As an MC, I've done battles, I've gone on stage and Eskimo Danced with some of the OGs. It's a completely different pressure to football, having to sing in front of loads of people.

How did that rap battle come about?
I played alongside Brad at Plymouth and we always sent little voice notes to each other. He'd come for me and I'd come for him – it was ongoing from there. One time, I went to relax in a studio with Brad and his other pals who do music. The Lord of the Mic, Jammer, was like, "I heard that you guys are MCs?" He said, "Why don't you both come down and clash?" It was legendary. You walk into that room and it's a new type of pressure again. Brad and I agreed, "OK then, let's settle the score right here". ⊙

ALEX

"I CHOSE A GOSPEL SONG AT MY CHELSEA INITIATION. FINALLY MOURINHO SAID, 'ENOUGH, BOY, YOU ARE REALLY BAD!'"

Jose? "Lovely person". Ibra? "Very kind". And the Brazilian defender's own ferocious free-kicks? "A gift from God"...

Interview Felipe Rocha

As a title winner in Brazil, the Netherlands, England, France and with the Selecao, what moments in your career stand out?
The early stages of one's career are always special. You enjoy every single moment: it's your childhood dream coming true. For me, it was even better. I was part of that Santos side alongside Robinho, Elano and others in my first season as a professional, and we won the league playing some fantastic football. Then I was fortunate enough to fulfil several other dreams such as playing in Europe and for the Selecao, winning trophies basically everywhere I went – and titles are definitely the most special memories for a footballer.

You were a powerful free-kick taker. Where did that talent come from?
It's a God-given gift. Then, it's about gaining confidence and taking a few risks when the opportunities arise. I was lucky to find some important people on my way to encourage me; my manager at Santos, Emerson Leao, was the first to identify my talent. I had an advantage, being a free-kick taker from long distances, as the competition to shoot was always smaller [*Laughs*]. When a free-kick is close to the penalty box, everyone is up for it.

Chelsea signed you in 2004 but had to loan you to PSV as you didn't qualify for a work permit. Did you fear for your Blues future?
I knew I'd be sent to PSV, as I hadn't played enough games for Brazil to qualify for a work permit in the UK, but the plan was a two-year loan. In the end, I remained at PSV for three seasons. I was anxious to play in the Premier League and put on that famous blue shirt, so I was over the moon to finally join Chelsea.

But first: three Eredivisie titles in a row...
I had an amazing time there. That period was crucial for my development as a player. I learned a great deal with the Dutch football school, so when I got to Chelsea I was more prepared for the challenge. And obviously it wasn't only about learning in Holland: it was about being part of a terrific generation and winning trophies. Guus Hiddink did a brilliant job to rebuild the PSV squad without much money. We were dominant in the Eredivisie and gave big clubs a lot of trouble in Europe.

You joined Chelsea in 2007. What did you make of boss Jose Mourinho back then?
He's a lovely person. Many people still ask me if he's a difficult coach to deal with – believe me, I have only nice words to say about him. Unfortunately, we worked together for only three months. When I joined Chelsea, I had to sing in front of the whole squad; perhaps it was the day that Mourinho laughed most in his entire life. I'm not a great singer. I think I chose a gospel number, but at some point Mourinho came up to the improvised stage and said, "Enough, boy, you're really bad".

Did you enjoy working with compatriot Phil Scolari? How did he get on with the group?
We worked together for about eight months at Chelsea. I believe he couldn't find the right mindset to adapt to English football. England and Brazil are two different cultures, so the team didn't get the best results and some of the players weren't totally happy under him.

Were you pleased to work alongside Guus Hiddink again, when he replaced Scolari?
Very much. It's great for a player to work with a manager who trusts you. At the time, Guus was managing Russia. Everyone knew he had a good relationship with Roman Abramovich, and Chelsea needed a caretaker for only four months, so Guus came to help us. I actually hoped he would stay for longer. I was having a difficult season, suffering with injuries, and he was incredibly patient. He took me out of some training sessions in order to get me fit for games. I didn't play much in the previous eight months, under Scolari, but I played well in the last part of the campaign under Guus.

What are your memories of the Champions League final in Moscow?
I was playing regularly before the final. John Terry was out injured, so Ricardo Carvalho and I were the defenders for a long period – and we were doing pretty well, actually. But Terry recovered ahead of the Champions League final and, as our captain, he'd naturally get his place back in the line-up. Someone would need to pay the bill, and guess what? Avram Grant picked me. But he was fair enough to explain the situation face-to-face. I have full respect for him – he's another lovely person. I really appreciated his attitude, to come and speak to me, and of course I respected his decision. The match itself was a real shame – we were very unlucky. It was pouring with rain in Moscow during the penalty shootout. It's obviously a terrible feeling to get that close to an important trophy and not be able to make it yours.

How difficult were your final months at Chelsea? What really happened between you and Andre Villas-Boas?
I suffered a knee injury at the beginning of the 2011-12 season and underwent surgery, so I wasn't available when AVB took charge. When I recovered, the team wasn't doing so well. I didn't play particularly great, either. He wanted to send a message to the squad, and chose to leave Nicolas Anelka and I training separately from the first team. The next day, he said we weren't committed to the team. We accepted his decision – what else could we do? – but the worst part was when Anelka and I went to collect our things and security wouldn't let us into the first team's changing room. We were asked to come back another time after the training session. That was a sad episode. So, we trained with the reserves and luckily Paris Saint-Germain made me an offer.

Tell us what it's like being a team-mate of Zlatan Ibrahimovic in Paris?
Ibra isn't an arrogant guy. He's actually very kind – a team player. Ibra loves to compete and, above all, he loves winning. So, be sure he'll demand the same feeling from all of his team-mates – and that's good. It's fantastic to see such a talented player involved that much with the collective aspects of the team.

What took you to Milan in the final part of your career? How was your time there?
I had an excellent season at PSG in my last year in France – I was in Ligue 1's Best XI – and the club offered me a one-year contract extension, but Milan were willing to give me a longer deal. Honestly, I'd always dreamed of playing for Milan one day, and the chance was there in the latter stages of my career. My time in Italy wasn't ideal, though. Milan were selling several of their top players and rebuilding the squad with younger talents. Unfortunately, that meant our results on the pitch weren't too positive.

You lifted the Copa America with Brazil in 2007. What did it mean playing for that team, beating Argentina 3-0 in the final?
That match is unforgettable for us. It tastes sweet to outplay your biggest rival in a Copa America final, especially given that Argentina were the favourites with a side packed full of stars: Lionel Messi, Carlos Tevez, Juan Roman Riquelme, Juan Sebastian Veron and many others. Plus, they were beating everyone else easily; that wasn't the case for us. We had to come through our semi-final against Uruguay on penalties. But that's football – everything went our way in the final.

TEAMS
Santos
Chelsea
PSV (loan)
PSG
Milan
Brazil

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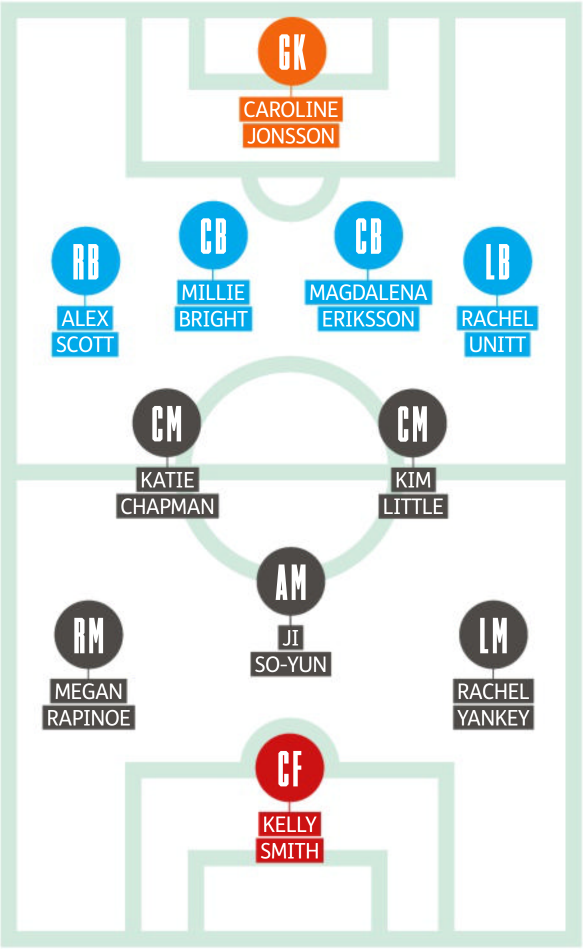
MY PERFECT XI

KAREN CARNEY

The ex-Arsenal and Chelsea winger selects a slew of England greats from a stellar career, but finds room for one USA megastar and fills her bench with Brazilian flair



THE GAFFER

EMMA HAYES
"I went with her over Hope Powell and Vic Akers because of the all-round impact she had on me. She looked after me and was always supportive. I learned lots of stuff, both on and off the pitch."

THE SUBS

- 01 FORMIGA
- 02 CARLI LLOYD
- 03 CRISTIANE

CAROLINE JONSSON
"I played with her in America and she was an incredible goalkeeper – her mentality was to be the best. She was really tall and imposing, and could throw the ball to the halfway line. It was close between her and Emma Byrne."

ALEX SCOTT
"Leaving out Lucy Bronze was tough, but Alex was way ahead of her time as a modern-day full-back who'd surge forward and play more like a winger. She had good energy and was very athletic. Her one-on-one defending was brilliant, too. We had a great relationship on the right flank for Arsenal and England, and she was my room-mate for over a decade."

MILLIE BRIGHT
"I don't think Millie gets enough recognition – she's one of the standout centre-backs in the world. She's got exceptional leadership skills and long passing, but her winning mentality is what sets her apart. If you were going into the trenches, you'd want her with you. She's phenomenal and trains so hard every day."

MAGDALENA ERIKSSON
"Similar to Millie, she's brave, good in the air and has a fantastic work ethic. It helps that she's left-footed, to provide that balance in a centre-back pairing. When she first joined Chelsea, she had a bit of technical work to improve on but never shied away from that. She trains the way she plays, which is why she's now at the highest level."

RACHEL UNITT
"She had a wand of a left foot. I still don't think I've seen a better one. People might say she lacked pace, but her positional sense was so strong that she never got torn apart. Her set-piece delivery and presence in the air were superb. She worked well with Rachel Yankey and always backed her up – a real team player."

KATIE CHAPMAN
"An ultimate winner. She'd run through anyone and play through anything, even stress fractures. She'd cover every blade of grass and absolutely loved a tackle. If the ball was there to be won, even if it wasn't in her favour, she'd win it. You'd hate coming up against her and always want her on your team. She won trophies wherever she went."

KIM LITTLE
"Kim's a little magician and one of the most intelligent players I've ever worked with. An all-round midfielder who can excel higher or deeper. She played alongside Katie Chapman at Arsenal for a while and they were a force."

MEGAN RAPINOE
"Uber-confident – full of swag and charisma! When we were together at Chicago Red Stars, she'd not long left college. She was still raw but had great natural ability with both feet, was quick, strong and could dribble. You need big players in big moments, and 'Pino' has proved she is one throughout her career. It's no surprise what she's gone on to achieve."

JI SO-YUN
"She had Emma Hayes on toast! In terms of overall impact, I reckon Ji's the finest foreign player to move abroad and shine in the WSL. She made everyone around her better. If you had her on your team in training, you'd win."

RACHEL YANKEY
"Rachel was my hero – I looked up to her as a role model and still do today. I watched her as a kid and was blown away. She was this rapid winger and I was like, 'Wow, I want to be just like her'. I thought Yanks was a visionary – she understood the game before anyone else."

KELLY SMITH
"I believe Kelly [left] is the best player England have ever produced. She'd win matches single-handedly. Quick and strong, you couldn't knock her off the ball. It was her intelligence too, and understanding of movement. The women's game in England wasn't quite ready for her – if she was playing now, she'd be the number one in the world."
Sean Cole

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